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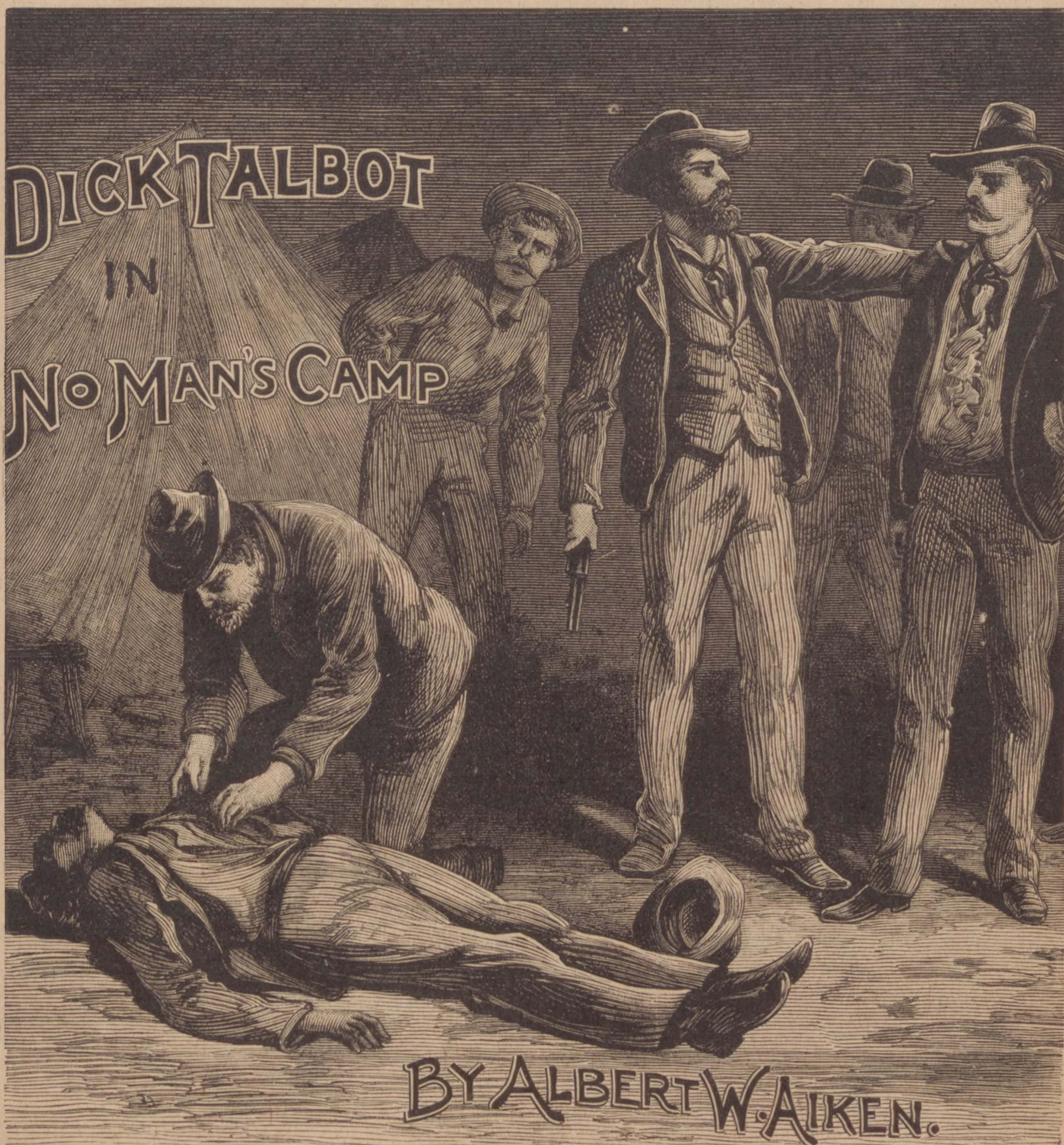
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"I WILL GIVE YOU FIVE MINUTES TO MAKE A FULL CONFESSION, DICK TALBOT!" WARNED THE MAYOR OF NO MAN'S CAMP.

Dick Talbot

IN NO MAN'S CAMP.

BY ALBERT W. AIKEN,

AUTHOR OF "OVERLAND KIT," "WOLVES OF NEW YORK," "BRONZE JACK," "THE FRESH OF 'FRISCO," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE ASSASSINATION.

It was near midnight, and the majority of the inhabitants of the mining settlement known as No Man's Camp had retired to their cabins.

Only the "night birds"—gamblers and their victims, and men troubled with universal thirst—were still up.

All the stores and resorts were closed save the "all night" saloons, which turned night into day, of which there were only two—one, a so-called "high-toned shebang," and the other a den of the worst class.

The first, known as the Golden Hairpin Saloon, was run by a woman calling herself 'Frisco Nell.

The second was run by a man who had the reputation of being the terror of the town—a big-fisted, brawny Irishman, who bore the awe-inspiring cognomen of Bulldog Bill.

On this particular night when we introduce our readers to a town, which on account of certain things was widely different from the usual frontier settlement, neither of the two all-night places could boast of much business.

It was an "off night," as the proprietors of the saloons had observed with a disgusted air, and but for the fact that these two particular places were always expected to be open, neither one would have run.

Just after the clock marked the hour of twelve, a good-looking young man, whose manner betrayed that he was slightly under the influence of liquor, came from the Golden Hairpin, crossed the street to Bulldog Bill's place, took a drink there, made the remark that things were so awful dull he "reckoned" the camp was about ready to go into the Sunday-school business, to which the keeper of the saloon assented, then departed.

He was one of the "bloods" of the camp, Donald Maxwell by name, sole owner of the Heather Bell Mine, one of the best claims in the neighborhood of No Man's Camp.

The Heather Bell property was on the outskirts of the settlement, and Maxwell occupied a cabin on the claim in company with his sister, a blooming beauty, not yet out of her teens, and the acknowledged belle of the district.

Young Maxwell was not in a good humor as he proceeded on his homeward road. Luck had not favored him in his attempts to woo the blind goddess, Fortune, at poker.

"I feel all out of sorts," he muttered, as he went on with rather uncertain steps. "If I was a believer in presentiments I should think that some piece of ill-luck was in store for me."

Hardly had the words left his lips when the report of a shot rung out clear and sharp on the still night air.

A scream of pain followed from the lips of the young man, as he threw up his hands and fell forward on his face.

Now, the report of a pistol-shot at night is not so uncommon in the average frontier mining-camp as to excite any attention, and had it not been for that shrill scream of pain, no one would have taken the trouble to find out why the shot was discharged.

But the scream was heard distinctly by the men in the two saloons, so there was a rush for the street.

There were ten of these men, six from the Golden Hairpin and four from Bulldog Bill's place, who gathered by the side of the wounded man, and, as they gazed in amazement at the sufferer, who had evidently received a terrible hurt, a stranger came up the street from the eastern trail. He was a muscularly-built, good-looking fellow—a "sport," evidently, from the style of his dress.

Attracted by the shot and the scream of mortal agony which accompanied it, he had hurried forward.

As soon as the miners recovered from their first sensation of horror they proceeded to assist the stricken man.

They turned him over, and as he glared in a distracted way at the faces glancing so anxiously down at his own, they realized that the wounded mine-owner had not many minutes of life left.

"Oh, I am done for!" the sufferer moaned. "But I knew this would happen—I knew that, sooner or later, you would murder me, you accursed villain!" and as he spoke he fixed his eyes directly upon the face of the stranger as though he recognized him, much to the astonishment of the other; then he gave a gasp, the death-rattle sounded in his throat, and Donald Maxwell was no more of earth.

For a moment the spectators stood aghast over the still body; then they were roused from their stupor by the harsh voice of a man coming

up in the rear of the sport, who, apparently, had been implicated by the last words of the murdered man.

"Stranger, I shall have to trouble you to throw up your hands!" the new-comer cried, halting within a couple of yards of the sharp, and leveling a cocked revolver full at his heart.

"What the deuce do you mean by such a demand?" cried the stranger, taken by surprise. "Just exactly what I say!" the other retorted.

"I call upon you to throw up your hands so that some of these gents can go through you for your weapons."

"And why should my weapons be taken from me?" the stranger asked.

"Because you are a prisoner."

"A prisoner!" the sport cried, more and more astonished.

"You bet your life on it! Didn't the man you murdered accuse you with his own lips? Didn't he say that you were the assassin?"

"Nonsense!" cried the other, immediately; "the poor fellow was evidently out of his mind and he looked up in my face just by chance; he would have glared in the face of any one who happened to be standing where I did."

"Mebbe so, but, that is something you will have to prove to the satisfaction of the men who will try you."

"Why should I murder the man?" the accused demanded. "He is a perfect stranger to me—I never saw him before in my life."

"Of course that is your say-so, now, but from what he said it kinder looks as if you had been hunting him for some time, and took the first chance you got to get in your work."

"I tell you I never saw the man before!"

"You will have a chance to prove this when you come to trial. If you are not the man who did the job you will be all right, but if you are, you will have a chance to stretch hemp, and no mistake."

"Oh, I can readily enough prove my innocence, but, while you are fooling your time away with me the right party may make his escape. According to my judgment, for I was too far away when the shot was fired to be able to say positively about the matter, the fatal bullet came from some one in ambush behind one of these houses, for I was near enough to distinguish this poor fellow in the clear moonlight, and saw him go down, after the shot was discharged. If the assassin had been out in the street, I feel pretty certain I would have seen him; but as I didn't, there is no doubt the scoundrel was hidden behind some house."

"Trying to wriggle out of the scrape, ain't you?" responded the townsman, with menace in his tone and manner. "You may be telling a straight story, but I reckon if you are the man who did the job, we will be able to fasten it on you. I'm the marshal of this town. My name is MacGregor—Black Mac the boys generally call me. Mebbe you have heard of a gentleman of about my size?"

"Never had that pleasure," responded the stranger, "which is not wonderful considering that I am new to this part of the country; but, now you have introduced yourself, I reckon I will know you when I see you again."

This was more than likely, for Roderick MacGregor, the Marshal of No Man's Camp—Black Mac—was a man so striking in his personal appearance that, once seen, he was not likely to be easily forgotten.

He was above the medium size, powerfully built, about thirty-five years of age, with a strongly-marked, not ill-looking face, although the bushy black beard which covered the lower part of it gave him a decidedly ferocious appearance.

MacGregor was known to be a man of decided courage, and, as marshal of as rough a camp as could be found along the whole line of the frontier, had made a reputation second to no man in the district.

"Do you surrender?" the marshal demanded, sternly.

"Certainly; you don't suppose I am fool enough to attempt to resist when I find the drop on me?"

"Hand out your weapons, then," and as the stranger proceeded to comply, Black Mac called upon one of the citizens to receive them.

"And now, my friend, I shall have to trouble you to accompany me to the calaboose. How may I call your name?"

"Richard Talbot," was the reply.

CHAPTER II.

GETTING AT THE TRUTH.

THE name of Talbot produced no impression upon the listeners, for none of them had ever encountered, or even heard of the man before, and therefore were ignorant of the renown which the prisoner had won in the wilds of the far West and along the Pacific Slope, but the reader who has followed the fortunes of the lion-hearted "Injun Dick" from the time we introduced him in the tale entitled "Overland Kit," through all his varied adventures, will understand that, when such a man made his appearance in any ordinary mining-camp it was safe to wager that his equal would not be likely to be found within its limits.

"Richard Talbot, hey?" the marshal remarked. "Well, that sounds as if it was a real handle, but sports of your kind generally have a different name for every camp they strike."

"That may be true enough, but Dick Talbot is the name I usually travel with."

"We will take your word for it, of course, as we at present don't know anything about you," the marshal rejoined.

"And now, Mister Dick Talbot, if you will have the kindness to come along with me, I'll be obliged to ye."

"Sandy Jones," and Black Mac nodded to a big, tow-headed miner, the man who had taken Talbot's weapons, "will you hustle forward and act as my deputy on this occasion?"

"Sart'in," responded the man thus addressed.

"Just march behind this gent and keep your eyes on him, but I reckon you are too sharp to attempt to try any gum-game, Mr. Talbot."

"Oh, you need not be afraid of my trying any such game," Talbot retorted. "I am no tender-foot, and know what the odds are against me as well as any one can tell me. I am not in the least alarmed about this charge, for I can clear myself without trouble if I have any sort of a fair trial."

"You will get that, and you can bet your bottom dollar on it, too!" McGregor assured. "I know that our camp ain't got the best name in the world, but when it comes to trying a man for his life, he can bet all he is worth that he will get the squarest kind of a deal, and that is the kind of men we are!"

"All I ask is a fair show," the prisoner declared. "And now, fellow-citizens, let me call your attention to some important facts right here, so that when I come to be tried the thing may be properly understood."

"Examine the body and see how the man is wounded. If he was shot by me that wound will be in front, for I was coming up the street facing him."

"Reddy O'Donohue," said the marshal, addressing a young, slenderly-built man, with a decidedly Celtic face, fringed by a scanty red beard, and crowned by crispy, curling hair of the same fiery hue.

"Here I am, always to the fore!" responded the party in a rich Limerick brogue, stepping forward as he spoke.

The marshal took a good look at the young Irishman, upon whose face dissipation was written in indelible lines.

"Reddy, are you sober enough to make an examination, and tell how the man is hurt?"

"Is it sober I am?" cried the Irishman, indignantly. "Can yees look me in the face and ax such a question?"

"Ah, you know you have been h'isting benzine enough to lay out three ordinary galoots!" MacGregor retorted.

"Faith, I'll not deny that I have had a sup or two wid some of these gentlemen who hang out at the Golden Hairpin, but as Mr. Macbeth says in the play, 'What has made thim drunk hath made me bould,' and I'll go bail that I am equal to anything that comes up."

This young Irishman was a decided character. He had strolled into No Man's Camp about three months before the time that our story begins, very much "down on his luck," as he frankly admitted without attempting to disguise the fact.

He said he was a doctor—a graduate of a Dublin, Ireland, medical college, but on account of getting mixed up in political matters had been obliged to flee from his native land, and in the East, having fallen into bad company right after landing, became involved in an affray which resulted in the severe wounding of one of the contestants, so had been compelled to seek a refuge in the wilds of the West.

How much of this tale was true and how much false the camp was puzzled to decide; but one thing was certain: the Irishman was tolerably well posted in the healing art, and, when he was sober, could render valuable assistance, but when really drunk was worse than no doctor at all.

We say when "really" drunk, for the Irishman was seldom seen in a perfectly sober condition; in fact, it was the common belief that Doc Reddy, as he was usually termed, never drew a sober breath, being always more or less under the influence of liquor, but when not stupidly drunk he knew what he was doing and saying as well as if he was entirely sober.

The marshal now saw that he was all right; so directed him to go ahead.

Doc Reddy proceeded with the examination with true professional dexterity, Talbot and the rest watching him with intense interest.

Soon he announced the result of his inspection.

"The wound is in the left side of the breast, and I should be afeather judging that the bullet has gone close to the heart and produced death by severing some of the big veins in that neighborhood, which is a mighty ticklish place for a bullet to rustle round in, do ye mind?"

"Would you judge that the wound had been inflicted by a man standing in front of him?" Dick Talbot inquired.

"Oh, no; the bullet ranged across the chest, not through it; the man was shot by some one standing well to wain side of him."

"That bears out my suspicion, I think," Talbot observed to the marshal. "I told you there wasn't anybody in sight when the shot was fired, for in this bright moonlight I should surely have seen any one on the street."

"Mebbe you were ambushed on the side of the street yourself?" the marshal suggested, shrewdly. "We have only got your word for it that you were in the street; no one saw you until after the shot was fired, and then there was plenty of time for you to run from your hiding-place, so that little idea of yours ain't worth much, to my thinking."

The bystanders looked at each other, and the greater part of them slightly nodded approvingly.

"There's some sense in that," Talbot observed, coolly, not at all troubled by the unbelief of the other; "but here is another point: Examine my revolvers and see if either of them has an empty chamber or bears any marks of having been recently discharged."

"Oh, you had plenty of time to shove a fresh cartridge in!" MacGregor declared, as Sandy Jones proceeded to carefully examine the weapons.

"Very true; a man used to quick work might be able to replace the discharged cartridge with a fresh one, but he would have to be extra smart to remove the powder-stains."

"Nary mark on these we'pons to show that either one on them has been fired recently," Sandy Jones declared at this point. "And all the chambers are full."

"I reckon you have fixed the thing up in pretty good shape, but mebbe we will be able to get you dead to rights before we get through, for all that!" the marshal asserted, confidently, as though positive in regard to the guilt of the prisoner.

"Perhaps you will, but so far I seem to have the best of it," Talbot retorted. "And now, another point: Just notice the extra large caliber of my revolver, forty, while the tools commonly carried are thirty-four or thirty-six."

"That's so!" Sandy Jones announced, as he examined the weapons; "they do carry an uncommonly big pill."

The crowd looked at each other, and it was plain from the expression upon their faces that the prisoner had scored a good point.

For the first time there was an ugly look upon Black Mac's features, and he shook his head in a menacing way.

"I reckon you must be a lawyer," he declared, "seeing how handy you are with your tricks."

"When a man is fighting for his life, it is apt to sharpen his wits," Talbot replied. "But I am not trying to play any tricks—I am only trying to get at the truth. I haven't any relish for being hung for the murder of a man whom I never saw in my life until I looked upon him in his death-agonies."

"Now, fellow-citizens, I want you to mark this point: When the ball which caused this man's death is taken from his body, I want it brought forward, and if it does not fit my tools it ought to be proof positive that I had no hand in the killing."

At this point Doc Reddy, who had been operating with his instruments on the body—he always carried a few tools in a leather case with him—held up the bullet which he had extracted from the wound.

"Here's the devil which cut poor Maxwell's thread of life in twain!" he exclaimed.

"Thirty-two caliber, by thunder!" Sandy Jones cried.

"That ought to be pretty good evidence that I am not the man," Talbot remarked.

"Mebbe you had another pistol and threw it away arter firing the shot," the marshal persisted, evidently convinced that Talbot was the assassin.

"Search for it, then; it cannot be far off," counseled the prisoner, quietly.

The advice was heeded, and while the search was going on, Talbot was conducted to the jail—a strong, one-storied shanty in the middle of the town; then the mayor was roused and informed of what had transpired, and the marshal proceeded to Maxwell's cabin.

CHAPTER III.

THE BELLE OF THE CAMP.

THE Heather Bell property was not far distant, although at the extreme eastern end of the town, and in a few minutes the marshal was at the door.

Through the chinks of the shuttered window gleamed a light, and MacGregor judged from this that Maxwell's sister, the beautiful Diantha, was sitting up, awaiting her brother's return.

He knocked gently at the door.

"Who is there?" inquired the girl in tremulous accents.

"Roderick MacGregor," the marshal answered.

The bar was removed and the door opened, allowing the girl to become visible.

As we have stated, Diantha Maxwell was a beautiful girl. She had regular features, rather

strongly marked, indicating a will of her own, with a clear complexion, great gray-blue eyes and auburn hair, which shone like gold when the sun beamed upon it.

The face of the girl showed that she had been weeping; she evidently was suffering deeply, and the idea came at once to the marshal that some busybody had taken it upon himself to inform her of the tragedy which had occurred.

"I am the bearer of bad news, Diantha," MacGregor said, with a softened voice.

"I know what you come to tell me—I have already been informed," and the girl's tears flowed afresh.

"Bear up, Diantha; it is a blow which must fall some day upon all of us, you know," the marshal observed, soothingly.

"Yes, and it did not come unexpectedly, either, for ever since I came to this place I have been expecting that some such tragedy would occur. But, come in, and tell me all the particulars, for the shock came with such terrible force upon me that I paid no attention to anything the man said after his announcement that my brother had been slain."

The marshal entered the cabin and the two sat down.

The Maxwells were old friends of MacGregor, the three having been brought up in Scotland together. Donald Maxwell and Roderick MacGregor had been chums from boyhood, and when they grew to man's estate, both were wild and reckless. Neither one had parents to restrain them, and so it followed that the young men got into bad company. Both became addicted to the use of liquors, and in a drunken brawl were unlucky enough to badly wound a companion. The man's hurt was so serious that it was thought he would die and the two friends sought refuge in flight. They crossed the ocean to America, and after landing in New York separated, each bent on carving out a new future. It was ten years before they again met, and then they came together in No Man's Camp. MacGregor had been located there since the first settlement of the place, having been one of the original discoverers of gold in the neighborhood, but the Maxwells were new-comers, Donald having purchased the Heather Bell property only a few months before the time our story opens.

Diantha had been but a child when the two young men were forced to fly from Scotland, and MacGregor was astonished to discover what a beautiful girl she had become, so it was the most natural thing in the world for him to fall in love with her.

But, ten years had wrought quite a change in Donald Maxwell, and, although he seemed glad to meet his old-time friend, when he so unexpectedly encountered him—particularly as from MacGregor's official position he was able to be of assistance to him—yet, after a while, it was plain to the marshal that Maxwell had no idea of renewing the old-time intimacy.

This was a disappointment to MacGregor, especially after he got the notion that Diantha was just the kind of girl he would like for a wife, which idea occurred to him very shortly after the Maxwells arrived in the camp.

He had counted on his old friend's assistance to aid him in his suit, but when, half in jest and half in earnest, he mentioned the matter to Donald, he could see that the brother was not pleased with the idea although he did not openly oppose it.

When he began to pay his suit to the girl, although the brother received him cordially, yet MacGregor was too shrewd a man not to see that it was all on the surface, and that, in a quiet way, Maxwell would do what he could to prevent the match.

Diantha herself was apparently uncertain in regard to her feelings. She liked MacGregor, and took pleasure in his society—which was not strange, considering that he was about the only gentleman in the town who was at all suitable for her to associate with; but, whether she would ever like him well enough to become his wife was a question which time alone could solve.

The marshal told the story of the tragedy, winding up with the announcement that the man who had committed the murder had been captured.

"But, why should he wish to kill Donald?" the girl asked in wonder.

"That is a mystery, but from the dying exclamation of your brother I should judge that the man is an old-time foe whose attack he expected."

"I suppose I do not know all the secrets of my brother's life," Diantha observed. "In fact, I am sure I do not, yet it seems to me if Donald had any such desperate enemy as this man I would surely have known something about him."

"Well, there are wheels within wheels, you know," MacGregor observed. "And it may be possible that this man was but the tool of another."

"Yes, but the mystery is still as great."

"Perhaps I can throw a little light on it. You know there is a saloon in the camp called the Golden Hairpin?"

"Yes, kept by a woman who must be a bold

and shameless creature, indeed!" Diantha exclaimed, her lip curling in contempt.

"I do not suppose that she is a paragon, or, indeed, that she sets herself up as a model, but she is a handsome, lady-like girl, and behaves in the most proper manner as far as any one in this camp knows."

"I have seen her and I suppose she might be called handsome, although she is a bold, masculine-looking creature."

"Well, her style of beauty is very attractive to some men," the marshal observed. "I know lots of good fellows in the camp who would be glad to marry 'Frisco Nell if they only had the chance, and among her most devoted admirers was your brother."

"Is it possible?" Diantha cried, decidedly shocked by the intelligence.

"Yes, and, apparently, she favored him more than any of the rest."

"Oh, I had no suspicion of anything of the kind!"

"It is the truth; but, during the last week there seemed to be a coolness between the two which caused a great deal of talk, for it was so marked that all the camp noticed it, but the cause none could guess. Now, the idea came to me that it was just possible your brother had 'soured' on this dark-eyed beauty, to use the slang term, and she, in revenge, hired this desperado to assassinate him."

"Oh, I can hardly believe that possible, although she is a bold, forward creature, yet she does not look as if she possessed the heart of a fiend, and otherwise she would never be able to bring herself to commit such a crime."

"She is a reckless woman, and if her love was scorned it might lead her to extreme measures," MacGregor suggested. "But I have no doubt we will get at the truth when we come to try this fellow, for Mayor White is a man with mighty persuasive ways, and he will put this fellow through in a way he can't resist."

"By the by, how are you fixed for money?" the marshal added. "Donald was pretty well ahead, I believe."

"Yes, I think so, although I do not know much about his business."

"The claim is all paid for—no notes out?"

"None that I know of; in fact, I am pretty certain there are no debts, for I heard him say last week that he was all free and clear now."

"I am glad to hear it, but if you need any ready money call on me."

"Thank you."

"Of course you are too sensible a girl, Diantha, not to understand that my visits to you have been prompted by a deeper feeling than mere friendship alone, and although this tragedy will for a time put a stop to my wooing, yet I hope that in the future you will listen to my suit."

"Roderick, you have spoken frankly with me, and I will be equally frank with you," the girl replied, after a moment's pause. "As yet I am not certain of myself. I like you, but not well enough to become your wife, although I will not say that that liking will not come in time. While Donald lived, though, our union could never have taken place, for he was most bitterly opposed to it."

"You astonish me!" MacGregor exclaimed.

"He never intimated as much to me."

"No; he was fearful that your influence would be exerted against him, and he did not dare to make a foe of you; but he was resolute on this point, I well know."

"What objection had he to me?"

"I will tell you, although it will not be pleasant for you to hear," she observed. "He declared that you had always been his bad angel and that but for you he would not have been compelled to leave Scotland; furthermore, you were responsible for all the vices he had contracted, and he felt sure you were a villain at heart."

MacGregor laughed grimly.

"Upon my word, he had a delightful opinion of me!" he cried.

"Yes; but I assure you I did not share it!" the girl hastened to exclaim. "I knew that both you and he had been wild in youth, but felt sure that, with age, you had outgrown it."

"Well, I am glad to hear you say so, and I assure you I am not afraid of close inspection into my way of life now. By the by, if you like, I will come to-morrow and assist you in examining Donald's papers so as to see just how you stand."

"I shall be glad of your aid."

Then the marshal took his departure, leaving the girl to mourn in solitude over the loss she had sustained.

CHAPTER IV.

THE MAYOR INTERVIEWS TALBOT.

AS stated, Gideon White, the mayor of the camp, had been roused after the prisoner was safe in the calaboose and informed of what had taken place.

Old Gid White, as the mayor was commonly termed, was a decided character. He was a big, burly fellow with a full brown beard and a fierce countenance.

To use his own favorite expression, he was a "rustler from 'way back." He had been a cat-

tile-man—a regular land-pirate, his enemies said—a rough and ready customer, equally quick with his fists and weapons, and bore the reputation of being the hardest man in the town to tackle when he had a sufficient quantity of liquor on board to make him ugly. And, as a rule, the mayor was anything but a temperate man.

He kept the largest store in the camp, and, as it was his custom to take a drink with every customer who bought a dollar's worth or more, it was but seldom he could be found entirely free from liquor.

On the night when the murder occurred, he had been on a more than usually extensive "tear," and had retired to his bed, which was in a small room at the back of his store, about twelve o'clock, "well loaded," "full as a tick," the man said who escorted him to his humble domicile.

As he had only had about half an hour's sleep when the messengers roused him from his slumbers to tell the particulars of the tragedy, he was still pretty well under the influence of the bad whisky.

The mayor, though, was one of those peculiar men whose brains never seem to be affected by what they drink, for he always knew what he was about, and the only effect the liquor had was to make him particularly obstinate and headstrong.

And on this occasion, when he learned the particulars of the case, he came to the determination to interview the man who had been so unceremoniously clapped into the calaboose.

To the jail then the mayor proceeded forthwith.

The jailer was a tall, slab-sided fellow, who rejoiced in the name of Yaller Jim, on account of his sallow complexion. Richmond was his name, but Yaller Jim he was almost always termed.

"Wa-al, Yaller, how is this galoot?" the mayor inquired, as he entered the outer room of the calaboose.

There were two rooms in the building—an outer one which answered for an office, and an inner one where the prisoners were confined.

"He's in the lock-up," and the jailer jerked his thumb over his shoulder toward the strongly-barred door.

"Pretty desperate cuss, eh?"

"Oh, no, one of the quiet, cool kind."

"Didn't try to kick up any ruction, then?"

"Not a mite; took it as easy as could be. I shot off my mouth 'bout his being in an ugly snap, and axed him how he felt 'bout stretching hemp. Now what do you s'pose the chap sed?"

"Hain't no idee."

"Axed me if I were a betting man, and would I be willing to risk a few dollars on my say-so."

"Ho, ho, ho!" laughed the mayor; "wa-al, now, this galoot is a cool hand and no mistake!"

"Oh, you kin bet all you are worth on that, and win!"

"I reckon I'll have to see what I kin do with the critter. Get me a candle; then unbar the door and let me in."

"I've got a spare lantern here which you kin have," the jailer observed.

"That will do."

Yaller Jim lit the lantern, then removed the bars and admitted the mayor to the inner room.

The calaboose could not boast of much furniture, for all there was in the apartment was a stool and a rude bench in one corner, covered with a buffalo-robe, which served for a bed—and on which Talbot, with the ease of a veteran, had made himself comfortable.

He had taken off his coat, rolled it up for a pillow, and was calmly reposing on the bench, stretched out at full length, sound asleep, when the two entered, but the noise they made roused him, for, like most men who for years have led lives of adventure, he was an extremely light sleeper.

He did not rise, though—merely opened his eyes and looked at his visitors, as much as to ask who they were and why he was disturbed.

"Hyer's the mayor come for to see yer!" Yaller Jim explained, at which Talbot rose to a sitting position, and nodding politely to the official, said:

"Glad to see you, sir, and I hope you are well."

The mayor and the jailer looked at each other; then both grinned, the speech seemed so utterly ridiculous.

"Better light out, Yaller, and give me a chance to talk to this galoot in private," the mayor said.

"All right; I'll be in the other room and if you want me all you will have to do is to yell."

Then the jailer retreated, first hanging the lantern up on a nail in the wall so as to afford light.

The mayor sat down on the stool.

"You heerd what Yaller said 'bout my being mayor, didn't ye?" he began.

"I did."

"An' I'm a hefty old mayor, too, an' don't you forget it! I'm a rustler from 'way back, I am, and the man who wants to get ahead of me has got to git up mighty early in the morning, an'

then the odds are a hundred to one that he will get skinned in the worst kind of way."

"All right; glad you have told me, for now I will know how to bet if I see you mixed up in any little picnic," Talbot observed, with perfect gravity.

The official looked at him sharply, at once deciding that the prisoner was a man quite above the common.

"Say, don't try any funny business, or I'll be apt to get up on my ear, and then thar'll be trouble!" the mayor warned, gruffly.

"Well, considering that I am a prisoner, accused of a serious offense, I don't think it is likely I will feel particularly funny."

"That is the way to talk; no use of kicking when you find the game is going dead ag'in' yer. Now, I want you to make a clean breast of it and spit the hull yarn out; how came you to kill Maxwell?"

"Oh, the fellow who was killed was named Maxwell, then?"

"Yes, Donald Maxwell; but you know that as well as I do. How came you to kill him, I ask?"

"Now, don't start off with the wrong end of the idea, for I am not the man who did the job!" Talbot declared. "I know no more about the matter than you do. I never saw the chap before to-night; there was not any reason why I should kill him, a perfect stranger to me, and, though it may appear to be mighty odd to you, I don't even know the name of this camp."

"You don't?" cried the mayor in wonder.

"Indeed I do not. I was on my way to Tombstone, but lost the trail and fetched up here. I know that this is not Tombstone, for it is not large enough, and I am a little puzzled to tell what camp it is, for I was told that the next town I came to would be Tombstone."

"So it would have been if you had kept straight on, but you evidently turned off to the southward, and from the time you left the main trail you have been going away from Tombstone instead of going to it."

"Ah, yes; I see; I had an idea that I was heading in the wrong direction; but, as the trail seemed to be old, and well-traveled, I concluded to keep on, thinking to come to some cabin where I could inquire."

"Wa-al, stranger, mebbe your say-so is all straight an' you don't know whar you air, though it seems a mighty strange yarn to me, so I will explain," the mayor remarked. "You have struck one of the durrest, strangest camps thar is on top of this hyer footstool, bar none! We call the town No Man's Camp, an' it gits its name from the fact that the leetle squar' bit of sile on which it is situated is No Man's Land. Thar's a dispute 'bout the boundary lines and this hyer bit of territory is disputable ground."

"Arizona says it is *hern*; New Mexico allows that *her* claim is first-class, while the yaller Greasers down in Old Mexico declare it belongs to *them*, an' that they will fight afore they will give up. An', on account of the dispute, nobody tries to lay down any laws for us, hyer; we are a law unto ourselves. No sheriff or *alcalde* dares to come into this camp with any law process; it would be as much as any man's life is worth."

"This hyer settlement is a refuge, an' it would take an army to h'ist any man out of it, no matter what he has done."

"All we ask is that, arter the galoot comes into the camp, he will behave himself. We do not interfere in any little private quarrels of course. If two gents have a growl and want to settle it, either with the fists or weapons, no one feels called upon to interfere, so long as the fight is a fair one and no advantage is taken by either man."

"Yes, I see; you have truly a remarkable camp—quite out of the common run, as you justly observe, and I am not sorry I happened to drop in on you, although I would have preferred this little misunderstanding should not have occurred right at the beginning of the game."

"Say, if you had a grudge ag'in' Maxwell why didn't you challenge him to a fair fight? Why didn't you give the man a chance for his life, an' then, if you had been man enough to downed him, nobody would have said a word ag'in' ye!" the mayor exclaimed.

"Hold on, my friend; don't go to assuming I am elected until the returns are in!" Talbot expostulated.

"You know durned well you are guilty!" cried the mayor, angrily.

"I know durned well that I am as innocent as you are yourself, Mister Mayor."

In a rage, Gideon White whipped out his revolver, drew back the hammer and held it ready for use.

"I will give you five minutes to make a full confession, Dick Talbot!" warned the Mayor of No Man's Camp, "and if you don't speak then, may Heaven have mercy on your soul!"

CHAPTER V.

A NOVEL METHOD.

UPON the features of the official was written angry determination as he threatened the prisoner with the revolver.

Imagine his astonishment, then, when Dick Talbot laughed in his face.

"And is *this* your notion of fair play, in No Man's Camp?" he cried. "Is *this* the way you do business? Make up your mind that a man is guilty and then go to work to force a confession out of him!"

"But you needn't wait for the five minutes to elapse, you cowardly cur!" and Talbot rose to his feet, his eyes blazing with excitement.

"You can fire immediately, for I can give the same answer now as I will then. I haven't anything to confess."

The mayor sprung to his feet, his face convulsed with rage.

"Say, you durned galoot, do you dar' to call me a cowardly cur?" he cried, his voice hoarse with passion.

"Yes, and that is what you are, or else you would never dream of threatening a helpless prisoner."

"I kin climb all over you without any pistol!" howled the big official, thrusting his revolver back into its holster.

"Bosh! you can't whip one side of me!" replied Talbot, defiantly.

"Oh, I can't, hey?" and the mayor began to execute a war-dance.

"No, and that is good, plain English."

"Oh, you bet it is! I understand, an' you kin bet on it!" yelled the official, hopping up and down in his excitement, and brandishing his big fists in the air. A man don't have to smack me in the face mor'n three or four times afore I understand that he wants to quarrel with me! I'm yer mutton, an' if I don't hammer you until you wish you had never been born, then my name ain't Gideon White!"

"If you belong to Gideon's band, here's my heart and here's my hand!" chanted Talbot, in true theatrical style.

This bit of nonsense on Talbot's part infuriated the mayor more than anything else.

"Hi! you stop that!" he cried; "don't you go to making up no songs 'bout me! Jest wait until I get through with you, and I reckon you will not feel much like singing!"

Then the mayor yelled for Yaller Jim.

That worthy, having been attracted by the loud voices, was on the alert and made a speedy appearance.

"Hey, Yaller, I'm going to smash this galoot into pancakes, an' I want you as a witness that I didn't take no advantage of him!"

The jailer, being used to the mayor's peculiar whims, did not attempt to remonstrate with him. On the contrary, he took possession of the stool and seated himself so as to enjoy the contest in comfort.

"All right! sail in your elephants!"

The mayor was prompt to obey the injunction, and he made a rush at Talbot with the idea of pinning him against the wall so as to be able to hammer him at his leisure; but, an old and experienced boxer like Injun Dick was not to be caught. As the mayor rushed upon him he ducked under his arm, and then, as the other turned, he dealt the official Gideon a blow which, alighting just under his left ear, sent him spinning up against the wall.

"Hooray!" cried Yaller Jim in huge delight; "that was a nasty crack! Pull yerself together, Mister Mayor, and go for him ag'in."

White was sorely exasperated; he considered that the other had played a trick upon him and he so expressed himself.

"What kind of fighting do you call *that*?" he howled. "Why don't you stand up to the rack and take yer fodder like a man, and do not dance round like a blamed jumping-jack?"

"Oh, you want me to stand up and face you, eh?" Talbot inquired.

By this time he had completely taken the "measure" of his man, to use the sporting term, and knew he could handle him without difficulty.

"Yes, that's the ticket, and if I don't hammer you until you feel as if you had been kicked by a mule, then I ain't the man I think I am."

"I shouldn't be surprised if you have made a mistake and you should turn out to be somebody else."

"Oh, you have chinned long enuff," Yaller Jim cried in disgust. "Come right down to solid business now."

By this time the mayor had recovered his wind, and he made another rush at his opponent.

Not a single inch did Dick Talbot retreat this time, but stood as solid as a rock.

With the utmost ease he parried the clumsy strokes of his assailant, and then, out shot his powerful right arm, catching the mayor right between the eyes with a power that forced the burly man backward and caused a countless number of stars to dance before his vision.

Before he could recover from his shock, with a well-directed "left-hander" which landed in the center of his chest, his opponent knocked him backward upon the bench, which had not been constructed to withstand such a shock as this, so it collapsed, and down to the ground, amid the ruins, came the discomfited boxer.

"Hi, hi!" exclaimed Yaller Jim, delighted with the sport; "first knock-down for the galoot, Dick Talbot! Now, Mister White, jest hump yourself or you're a gone coon!"

As the mayor rose slowly to his feet he felt extremely disgusted.

The violent treatment which he had received had, in a measure, sobered him, and he had come to the conclusion that he was no match for the stranger, who seemed to possess the strength of a lion and the quickness of a tiger.

"Say, sport, you seem to be used to this sort of thing," White observed, completely out of breath with his exertions.

"Oh, yes, I am the champion of America!" Talbot remarked in a careless way.

"The devil you are!" the mayor exclaimed, while Yaller Jim opened his eyes widely and stared at the announcement.

"Yes, I am the champion when all the other champions are out."

"Wa-al, champion or no champion, I don't want any more of you."

"You are satisfied, then?"

"You kin bet yer life on it! Thar ain't anything of the hog about me. I allers know when I git enough."

"You are a sensible man," Talbot remarked. "Then this little confession business you will leave to some other time?"

"Yes, I reckon you needn't talk if you don't want to."

"All right; much obliged."

"I will try to put you through a course of sprouts, though, when we come to your trial," the mayor threatened, "and, mebbe, I will be able to git square with you for this leetle picnic."

"Well, I shall always be ready to give you all the satisfaction in my power," Talbot replied.

"I don't feel in the least afraid about the trial business, though, for I didn't kill the man and I know that things can not be twisted around so as to make it appear that I did. If you give me any sort of a fair show I will not have any trouble to prove my innocence."

"We kin tell better about that when we git at yer trial; but I kin jest tell you that if I have a chance I will make you stretch hemp!" the mayor growled, angrily.

"Well, if you don't come out any better in your next game than you did in this picnic, you will not have anything to boast of," the prisoner retorted.

"Crow all you like now; mebbe you will not get another chance!" and with this the mayor and his satellite departed.

"That fellow will do his best to worry me," Talbot remarked, after his visitors were gone and he heard the bars go up across the door.

"But, it was one of those things which couldn't be helped. I had either to hammer him or else let him pound me."

At this point Talbot's eyes fell upon the ruined bench.

"Confound the clumsy ruffian. He has broken down the bunk and I shall have to sleep on the floor for the rest of the night!"

He proceeded to arrange things so as to make himself as comfortable as possible. Yaller Jim had neglected to remove the lantern, so he was able to see what he was about.

Just as he had the couch arranged to his satisfaction, he was disturbed by the entrance of Yaller Jim, who, after he got into the room, winked at him in a knowing manner.

"Well, what do you want?" Talbot asked, perceiving that the man hesitated about speaking.

"Say, sport, you are in an awful tight place."

"Maybe I am, but I don't feel at all worried."

"The old man has got it in for you, and will sock it to you, red-hot!"

"I do not doubt that he would like to, but, men can not always have their own way in this world."

"The old man has got this camp jest whar he wants it, though, and you don't stand no show for yer life."

"That isn't very consoling information."

"Say, how are you fixed? Have you got any ducats?"

"Not many; I am pretty nearly broke."

"Well, I was going to say, if you could put up some dust I could get you out of this. I could forget to put the bars up tight, you know, fix 'em so you could force your way out, but it ought to be with fully fifty chucks, anyway."

"The ante is too high; I can't reach it."

"Well, I'll let you owe me some of it and take what you've got," the jailer suggested.

"Oh, no; you are too kind, and I don't want to take advantage of you," Talbot retorted.

"Besides, as I am not guilty, I am not anxious to escape. I would rather stay and face my trial. Only guilty men flee. And then, too, some fellow may be on the lookout, and if I try to get away will plug me with his revolver. So, on the whole, I will stay where I am."

Yaller Jim uttered a few remonstrances and then withdrew, disgusted that the prisoner smelt out the trap so quickly.

CHAPTER VI.

UNEXPECTED VISITORS.

THE brain of Diantha was in a whirl after the marshal retired, for the information he had imparted was entirely unexpected.

She had seen the bold, dark-faced beauty who ran the Golden Hairpin Saloon a number of times since her advent in the camp, and regarded her with that strong and peculiar aversion which most women are apt to feel toward one of their sex who, to their thinking, is no better than she ought to be, and the idea that her brother had been fascinated by such a creature was particularly disagreeable to her.

She had been conscious for a week or two that something was the matter with Donald, for he acted strangely. By skillful questioning she had endeavored to find out why he was troubled, but he would not give her any satisfaction, and she finally came to the conclusion that business matters were not working as he desired, although he declared that he was getting along splendidly.

But now it was as if a veil had been lifted and she saw clearly.

It was the fascination exercised by this dark-eyed siren which had so changed him, and she felt certain Roderick MacGregor was correct when he surmised that the dashing 'Frisco Nell had something to do with Donald Maxwell's death.

"He became entangled with this miserable creature," she murmured, "and when the spell grew weak and he endeavored to break away from the snare, her anger was excited and she revenged herself in this cruel way."

For fully an hour she mused upon the subject, sorrowing for her brother one moment and the next planning how she could be revenged upon the bold creature whom she associated with his death.

Nature became exhausted at last and the girl retired to rest. She did not undress, for she thought she would only lie down for a few minutes; although she felt tired—completely worn out, in fact, by the long vigil she had kept, yet her sorrow was so great she did not believe she could slumber.

But sleep, "that knits up the raveled sleeve of care," did not disdain to visit the eyelids of the girl, and within ten minutes from the time she extended herself upon the bed she was firmly bound in slumber's chain.

How long she slept she knew not, but she judged that it was only for a few minutes—it was nearly two hours in reality—when she was suddenly awakened by an unaccustomed noise and the consciousness immediately flashed upon her that some one was in the room.

The apartment was illuminated by a candle, which burned upon the table. She had not extinguished the light upon going to bed, anticipating that her slumbers would not be of long duration.

By the aid of the dim flame she was able to distinguish all objects plainly.

Two men were in the room—two big, burly ruffians, roughly dressed. Their faces were concealed by black masks, from under which came bushy, dark beards; well-worn slouch hats were pulled down low upon their foreheads and rough, tangled, dark locks came from under the hats.

They were fully armed, and as the girl opened her eyes, one menaced her with a cocked revolver, while the other flashed a huge bowie-knife before her terrified eyes.

"Oho, you are awake, are you?" exclaimed the man with the knife, in hoarse accents, evidently assumed to disguise the natural tones of his voice. "Don't you dare to utter a sound or it will be the death of you. We are hyer on business, we are, my pal and me, and we don't propose to have our leetle game interfered with by any woman's squealing."

"If you keep quiet no harm will come to you, but if you attempt to be ugly we will slice that dainty throat of yours, jest the same as though you were only a chicken!"

Diantha came of a brave old Scotch race, and though she realized that she was helpless and completely in the power of the ruffians, yet she did not lose her presence of mind.

She had been long enough in the wilds of the West to understand that ruffians like the intruders would not hesitate at any bloody work either to secure booty or provide an escape, so, summoning all her fortitude, she replied:

"Do not fear that I will give an alarm, and I beg that you will not harm me."

"Not a mite, if you don't come any squealing game," replied the ruffian with the knife, evidently the master-spirit of the two. "We hev a leetle business to attend to in this ranch, and if you will be quiet while we fix it—it will not take us a heap of time—then we'll git and you will be none the worse for seeing us."

"Very well; I will give you my word that I will not interfere with you in any way."

"You've just got a level head on them elegant shoulders of yours and no mistake," the ruffian exclaimed in a tone of admiration.

"And you need not be in the least afraid of our hurting you. We never go in for violence if we kin help it, but, when we are r'iled we are terrors and no mistake!"

"Now we will have to trouble you for to let us put a bandage over yer eyes, 'cos it will make us nervous while we are working if we know you are looking at us."

"I have no objection," responded the girl,

trying to put the best possible face on the matter.

"You are just the kind of a gal that I like to do business with," the ruffian declared. "You are as cool as a cucumber, and don't set up no blamed howl that won't do you no good."

Then the ruffian produced a bandage of black cloth and proceeded to blindfold the girl, and he performed this operation in so skillful a manner that when it was finished Diantha might as well have been blind for any use her eyes were to her.

Having made up her mind not to attempt any resistance, the girl remained perfectly quiet. She could hear the men moving around the room and guessed that they were searching for valuables, and smiled to herself as she thought how poorly they would be paid for their trouble.

Donald Maxwell was one of those "canny" Scotchmen who did not believe in keeping valuables in the house. Of course he was obliged to keep some money in order to meet current demands appertaining to the running of his mine, but as fast as any considerable sum accumulated he transferred it to the Express Company, which, after the fashion common to the frontier camps, acted as a sort of local bank.

And for whatever money he had on hand, together with his valuable papers, like the rest of the miners, he had a secret hiding-place, and as it was carefully arranged at the back of the fireplace, Diantha did not believe the robbers would be able to discover it.

She listened attentively, trying to discover from their movements what they were doing, and at last, to her dismay, she was certain she heard them at the fireplace; still, although they might search diligently, it was possible they would not be successful in discovering the secret.

In this state of suspense she remained for what seemed to her to be a terribly long time—in reality it was only some twenty minutes—then the ruffians came to the bedside again.

"Wal, we ain't been able to work the raffle right up to the handle as we calculated," observed the ruffian who had acted as spokesman before. "We allers heerd it allowed that yer brother kept a big lot of money on hand, and we reckoned we could make a big thing, but we hain't struck it rich."

"You have been misinformed," Diantha replied. "My brother has never been in the habit of keeping much money in the house, for just as soon as the sum amounted to anything he paid it in at the Express office."

"Wal, we heered that, too, but we reckoned it was only a blind for to make folks think that he didn't keep much solid stuff around."

"It is the truth."

"I reckon it is, for, though we have s'arched high and low we ain't scared up ducats enuff to more'n pay for a good round of drinks."

"Say, hain't your brother got two or three secret places whar he hides his cash away?"

Diantha hated to descend to downright falsehood even when she had so good an excuse for it as at present existed, so she equivocated.

"My brother did not trust me with all his secrets," she said. "Being reserved by nature he trusted implicitly in no one but himself, but this one thing I am sure of—he did not keep any money in the house—that is, to any amount, and if you have found any secret hiding-place you may be satisfied that you have been as successful as it is possible for you to be."

Diantha's speech was a shrewd one. She knew that there was a hiding-place in the room—a decoy one containing a small sum of money, constructed with the idea that if the cabin was entered by thieves, when they found this secret board they would jump to the conclusion it contained all the valuables there were in the house and so would refrain from searching further.

"Wal, yer brother was cute not to risk his cash in the house, and we hain't got enuff for to pay us for the trouble we have taken, but it is all right; a man can't hope to keno, every time. It is a mighty lucky thing that you didn't go to squealing, 'cos it would have r'iled me if I had had to stick a knife inter you and then got no big plunder arter it."

The girl shuddered at the cool ferocity with which the ruffian spoke.

"Wal, so-long! We must be going. Jest you keep quiet for about ten minutes and then you kin have the use of yer peepers ag'in, and, as a friend, I would advise you not to try and kick up much of a disturbance 'bout this raid; you ain't hurt, to speak of, and it won't do you any good to get galoots like us down on you."

And with this warning the ruffians departed.

Diantha did not attempt to move until she felt certain the ten minutes were up; then she removed the bandage from her eyes and hastened to the fireplace.

As far as she could discover no article had been removed, although it seemed to her as if the papers, which were in large envelopes, had been disturbed, but this was a point on which she could not be certain, as her brother had always attended to them.

"I must ask Roderick's advice," she decided.

CHAPTER VII.

THE TRIAL.

As Talbot had anticipated the defeated official had laid a trap for him, smarting under the defeat he had sustained.

If he had accepted the apparently friendly offer of the jailer, after he got clear of the jail the mayor would have made a target of him, and of course no blame would have been attached to Mayor White for shooting down an escaping prisoner.

White's disappointment was great when he discovered that the jail-bird was too shrewd to fall into his clumsy trap, and as he made his way to his store he gave vent to his rage by cursing the prisoner in the most hearty manner.

The easy manner in which the stranger had whipped him galled the mayor to the quick, and what made the matter worse was that Yaller Jim had been a witness to his defeat, and although in an off-hand way he had told the jailer that it would be just as well if he should keep from "shooting off his mouth about the matter," and Yaller Jim had responded that he wouldn't think of mentioning it for the world, yet from the peculiar grin upon the jailer's face he felt satisfied that the other considered the joke too good a one to keep. In fact, he "reckoned" a man would be safe in betting large odds that it would not be many hours before the story of how badly the stranger had whipped him would be known to all the town.

"Thar's only one consoling thing 'bout the matter," the official muttered, after he had cursed the victorious stranger to his heart's content, "and that is, I will have a chance to hang the cuss to-morrow, 'cos I will bring him in guilty if thar's any show to work the trick that way."

When he reached his store, the mayor aroused his clerk, who occupied a bunk under the counter in the front part of the building.

This clerk was a tall, slender, raw-boned youth, Samuel Beaver by name, but he possessed so little flesh that the miners had named him Slim Sam when he had made his appearance in the town, and he was seldom called anything else.

White instructed the clerk to call him at six in the morning, setting his alarm-clock for that hour, and to hunt up the town marshal, Black Mac, and have him at the store as soon after that time as possible; then the official retired to rest.

The clerk woke him promptly and ten minutes afterward made his appearance with the marshal, and while Black Mac proceeded to the mayor's private apartment, Slim Sam began to get the store ready for business.

Gid White was in a terribly bad humor, and there was good reason for it. Not only was he sore from the effects of the blows he had received, but his face bore unmistakable marks of the strength and hardness of the stranger's fists, for the mayor displayed as fine a pair of black eyes as mortal man ever wore.

Black Mac, catching sight of this disfigured countenance, immediately began to grin, as was only natural under the circumstances.

The mayor felt extremely disgusted, but putting the best face he could on the matter, explained:

"I met with an accident—"

"He proceeded no further, for the marshal 'haw-hawed' right out, convincing the official that it wasn't any use for him to attempt to lie about the matter.

"I see, I see," Black Mac remarked, when the mayor stopped short in his speech. "I reckon you run up against the calaboose in the dark and the building fell over on you."

The reference to the calaboose satisfied the mayor that his suspicion in regard to Yaller Jim's discretion was correct, and that the jailer had already "given away" the story of his defeat.

"I reckon you jest know what kind of a thing it was that I run ag'in," White observed.

"Yes, I heard the yarn the first thing this morning, and I reckon this sport must be an extra good man or he never would have been able to handle you in the way he did."

"That blamed Yaller Jim is worse than a woman!" the mayor cried, in disgust.

"Tain't in human nature to hold in on a yarn of this kind," the marshal observed.

"Say, Mac, this sport is a dangerous man!" White asseverated, in a tone of conviction.

"Oh, yes, there isn't any doubt about that."

"The kind of man to make trouble in a camp of this sort."

"Yes, I think so."

"We have been able to run the town pretty well since we have been working together," the mayor remarked.

"No mistake about that, but then you are a good man, and I flatter myself that I am another; then, too, we have a good crowd at our backs."

"Yes, that is true; we have run the machine just as she ought to be run, but I tell you what it is, if we had a few men like this sport to deal

with we would be apt to have a heap of trouble."

"Yes, yes, no mistake about that."

"Wal, as this man threatens to be dangerous, don't you think he ought to be put out of the way?"

"Most decidedly," was the emphatic answer.

"We kin do it easy enough. We have got the fellow in a tight place. He is accused of this murder, and from what you said last night the evidence seems to be pretty strong against him, so I reckon we kin sock it to him. As he is a stranger he will not have any friends to stand up for him."

The marshal shook his head in a doubtful way.

"Well, I don't know about that," he remarked. "It is a mighty queer thing, but a sport of this kind seems to pick up friends with very little trouble. I don't exactly understand how it is, but there's no mistake about it, for I have noticed it a dozen times. When a cock of this breed takes a tumble he always lands on his feet."

"I agree with you that he is dangerous and that he ought to be put out of the way; yet I know that he is no common man, and will be certain to make a big fight for his life, so we must fix the matter to put him through with a rush. I am afraid the evidence is not strong enough to hang him if we give people time to think the matter over. The way to work the trick is to put up a job on him. Run the thing through with a hurrah and so string the man up before the crowd can get time to think how the thing is going."

"You bet! That is the way to work it!" the mayor assented, delighted at the prospect.

"I will speak to some men who can be trusted to do the job to the queen's taste," the marshal assured.

"Judge Lynch will attend to this sport's case, and from his decision there isn't any appeal to a higher court."

"That is Gospel truth, as sure as you are born!"

"Let me see," observed Black Mac, abruptly; "you sold Maxwell the Heather Bell property?"

"Yes; but I had no notion that it was worth much. The Heather Bell was a new lead which he located on the claim that covered about two acres."

"Did you get all your money?"

"No; there's a hundred still due."

"The original sum was a thousand?"

"Yes."

"And he has paid you nine hundred?"

"Nine hundred exactly, paid in nine equal payments."

"And he holds your receipts for the money?"

"Yes."

"Now, if Maxwell was a careless man, and those receipts should be lost, you would be able to get hold of the property which is now worth fifty thousand dollars at the least," the marshal suggested, looking at the mayor in a very peculiar way as he spoke.

"Great Scott!" cried White, "that is so, ain't it? And I never thought there was any chance of such a thing happening,"—returning the peculiar look as he answered. "And you are kind o' sweet on the sister, too."

"Pears to me, Mac," the mayor continued, after a pause, "that you would stand a better chance to win the gal if she did not own the mine. A gal with a property worth fifty thousand dollars might be inclined to put on some frills."

"Very true."

"And, I say, since you have put this idee into my head, darn me, if I ain't willing to do the fair thing by you!"

Then seating himself at the table upon which were writing-materials the mayor hurriedly drew up a document which he handed to Black Mac.

"Give me a dollar and that's yourn!" he cried.

"In consideration of the sum of one dollar, the receipt of which I acknowledge, I hereby transfer to R. MacGregor four-fifths of all my right, title and interest in the mining property now known as the Heather Bell Claim. (Signed)

"GIDEON WHITE."

MacGregor read the document aloud, then passed a dollar to the mayor, folded the paper and stowed it away in the long pocketbook which he carried in his breast.

"But, I say!" exclaimed the mayor, as a sudden idea occurred to him; "I reckon that Maxwell had considerable money deposited with the Express Company, for I know it was his custom to send his money away pretty regularly."

"Yes, maybe the Express receipts are mislaid, too, and the company will not be apt to pay without the receipts are produced to show that they received the money."

"You kin bet yer life on that!" the mayor declared, emphatically. "The durned old Express Company never gives up a cent without the receipts are produced to show that they got the money."

"Well, just as soon as we get through with this hanging picnic I will go up to the mine and examine the papers so as to see just how Max-

well stood. I was up there last night—I went to break the news of her brother's death to the girl—and I arranged then to come up this morning, but I have calculated this trial would take up more time than I expected, and so have sent her word she need not expect me until about noon."

"We will have this hanging match over long before that!" the mayor averred. "We will put on a full head of steam and rush her through in short order. How soon will you be ready?"

"In about half an hour," the marshal replied. "It will not take me long to get my gang ready."

"In half an hour, then, we will go at it."

With this understanding the two separated.

The mayor proceeded to the hotel—the Metropolitan was its high-sounding title, although it was only a rudely-constructed two-story board shanty—and got his breakfast.

The murder of Maxwell was the prevailing topic, and the mayor did his best, without openly betraying the interest he took in the matter, to influence all with whom he conversed against the prisoner.

Eight o'clock was the hour the mayor had fixed for the trial, and as there was not a room in the camp big enough to hold one-half of the citizens who were anxious to be present at the ceremony, White was considerate enough to arrange for the examination to take place in the open air, announcing that he would hold court right in front of the hotel.

The news had spread far and wide, and there was hardly a man within any reasonable distance of the camp who had not knocked off work and come into town to assist at the trial.

The prisoner was produced, guarded by the marshal and Yaller Jim, and the mayor opened the proceedings with a short speech.

He told the story of the brutal murder of the unoffending Donald Maxwell, cut off in the flower of his youth by the bullet of a concealed assassin, and then detailed how the prisoner had been taken "red-handed" after the act.

"Hold on! hold on!" cried Talbot indignantly at this point, "you haven't got the least proof of that. I happened to be coming up the street at the time, and you must not assume that I am the murderer when there is not the least proof against me excepting that I was one of the first to reach the side of the slain man!"

"You know you are guilty, and that you would have been killed on the spot but for the marshal hyer making you a prisoner, so that you could have a fair trial and be condemned by a reg'lar court," the mayor responded with fierce demeanor, as if to silence all denial.

And then cries of "Lynch him! lynch him!" came from half a dozen men, and a determined rush was made for the prisoner—a big, brawny, black-bearded fellow, brandishing a lariat with a noose all ready at one end of it, acting as leader.

CHAPTER VIII.

A FRIEND IN NEED IS A FRIEND INDEED.

OF course in a case of this kind there are always plenty of idle fellows in a mixed crowd to take up a cry when a bold leader sets them an example. A multitude is quickly swayed either for good or evil; so, when the half-dozen fellows set up the yell of "Lynch him!" and the black-bearded fellow swung the noosed lariat in the air, there were fully a dozen roughs glad to take up the cry and howl "Lynch him!"

The rush toward the prisoner was a determined one, and the marshal, instead of making any efforts to protect the accused, simply turned upon his heel with the remark:

"I reckon you are a gone coon, Mr. Talbot."

Yaller Jim, who had never been noted for his bravery, followed the example of his chief, and fell back.

And the mayor, who commanded a good view of the crowd, being seated in a chair placed upon a dry-goods box, did not so much as lift a finger to protect the prisoner, but laughed as though he thought the appeal to Judge Lynch was a good idea.

Talbot seemed doomed, for the crowd gave way before the lynchers, and their prey seemed fairly within their grasp.

But before the brawny ruffian with the lariat could get near enough to fling the noose over Talbot's head, a new actor appeared upon the scene—or, more correctly—actress, for it was a woman, and no less a person, too, than the dashing, dark-eyed, dark-haired 'Frisco Nell, the proprietor of the Golden Hairpin Saloon!

She was standing on the outskirts of the crowd to the right of the prisoner, leaning against an empty whisky-barrel which had been rolled out of her saloon, and the moment she saw that neither the marshal nor the mayor had any idea of attempting to protect the prisoner, she was prompt to act.

With surprising quickness she leaped upon the barrel, whipped out a pair of revolvers and leveled them at the yelling men.

"Hold on there!" she shouted in a voice which rung out clear and shrill above the din. "The first man who dares to lay his hand upon the prisoner dies in his tracks!"

The lynchers halted as suddenly as though

they had been turned into statues by the speech.

"Frisco Nell bore the reputation of being a dead shot with the pistol, and not a man in the crowd was anxious to test her skill.

Leadville Mat, as the big, black-bearded fellow was called, glared in a ferocious way at the girl, who presented a charming picture with her dark face flushed with excitement.

"What call hev you got to take a hand in this picnic, I'd like to know?" he demanded, indignant at being baffled of his prey.

"The call to interfere that justice may be done!" the girl replied, with decision.

"I reckon you ain't calculated that yer pop-guns ain't cocked!" sneered the ruffian, changing the lariat into his left hand and whipping out his pistol with his right.

"I reckon you haven't calculated on self-acting tools," retorted 'Frisco Nell. "And I give you fair warning if you raise that revolver I will drive a bullet through you so quickly you won't be able to tell what hurt you!" and there was a look in the girl's eyes which told him that the speech was no idle boast.

The ruffian hesitated, and his companions were equally loth to brave the anger of the fearless girl.

And now, a second voice.

A greasy-looking fat man, clad in rags and with a dilapidated hat, who was in the crowd directly behind Talbot, advanced into the open space and from a secret hiding-place amid his rags brought forth a revolver, which he flourished in the air.

"Oh, this hyer sort of thing makes me weep, fellow-citizens!" the fellow vociferated; "it riles me, a free-born American, to think that such things kin be—me, the original Joe Bowers!

"Oh, no, feller-galoots, this hyer thing must not be! We kinnot allow any black-bearded purp of a yaller dog for to jump in and try to run this camp in no sich way as *this*; and although I don't know this Mister Talbot from a side of sole-leather, yet, for the honor of the camp, I must stick my spoon into this soup and stop it's b'iling! In the words of the immortal poet, I howl—No Judge Lynch in mine, you bet!"

As the reader of the Dick Talbot novels will remember, the irrepressible vagabond, Joe Bowers, had a taking way with him when he tried his eloquence upon a mixed crowd, and his bold following of 'Frisco Nell's lead produced a decided impression.

The would-be lynchers looked at each other irresolutely, as though each man expected his fellow to make the first move.

'Frisco Nell was quick to improve the situation.

"Fellow-citizens, it has been the boast of this camp that we gave fair play to every man who ever came into it, but in this case we are not living up to our words!" she cried.

"I don't know whether this man is guilty or not, but one thing is certain—it is no way to find out to allow Judge Lynch to step in and hang the man without a trial.

"Give this party a fair trial, and then, if he is guilty, I reckon no one will object to his being punished."

"That's the talk!" yelled Bowers. "Oh, it does me good to hear sich chunks of sense thrown out so loosely: and I am consarned, too, for the good name of this hyer camp, for I have come into it, a weary pilgrim, to grow up with the country, and I am the kind of cuss you need, too, for to give the town a boom! I'm all-wool and a yard wide, warranted to wash, though I can't honestly say that I am fond of water in any shape," and Bowers made a grimace.

"But when it comes to whisky, I kin git away with more tanglefoot and stand up under it than any man who ever shook a leg to the westward of the big Mississippi, and don't you make no beefsteak 'bout *that*, you sage, grave and venerable men!"

Gid White and Black Mac looked at the crowd and then at each other. Both had arrived at the same conclusion: the lynch game would not work. A majority of the crowd was decidedly against any such measures; so the mayor made a virtue of necessity and gravely protested that all he wanted was to execute the wishes of the camp.

"I ain't got anything ag'in' this byer man!" he proclaimed, a remark which caused a laugh, for the story of how Gid White had essayed to whip the prisoner in the calaboose and succeeded in getting soundly thrashed in the attempt had been widely circulated.

The mayor, realizing that the joke was on him, grinned in a ghastly way as he went on with his speech:

"I want him to have a fair trial, of course, and if the evidence don't prove that he is the man who killed Maxwell, I ain't got any word to say ag'in' him. But I reckoned from the way the howl went up to lynch him, that all you men had made up your minds that he ought to be hanged, and I wasn't going to sp'ile the fun by interfering."

"Yes, that was my idea," the marshal added. "I reckoned the crowd thought it was competent to decide whether the man was guilty or not, and I did not think I was called upon to inter-

fere; but if it is your say-so to have the man tried, why, I will see that he is put through in first-class style."

"Yes, yes, try him! try him!" exclaimed four or five of the leading miners in a chorus.

And so the trial was proceeded with.

As nothing new was brought forward, we will not repeat what the reader already knows.

The only evidence to connect Talbot with the murder was his presence in the street and the last words of the murdered man, but, as he had not called Talbot by name when he seemed to accuse him of hounding him to his grave, and the witnesses testified that Maxwell was writhing in the agonies of death at the time, the conclusion that the dying man's mind was wandering was not an unreasonable one; and opposed to the charge of murder were the facts that Maxwell had been killed by a bullet of entirely different caliber from those in the sport's revolver, and that no evidence was produced to disprove his statement that he never had met Maxwell.

So the mayor, seeing that the majority of the crowd believed Talbot to be innocent, pronounced the verdict "not guilty," but coupled it with the recommendation that the sport had better "quit the camp."

"Nary quit until I find out who killed this unfortunate Maxwell!" was Talbot's startling and unexpected reply.

CHAPTER IX. THE PARDS' PLAN.

TALBOT, being released and his weapons restored, went to the hotel where he arranged for a room.

A large number of the crowd followed and tendered him quite an ovation, this attention chiefly taking the form of requesting him "to p'ison himself" at the bar. Had he been a drinking man he would have been howling drunk after the first half hour.

But, if Talbot did not drink—contenting himself with a couple of "rounds" only, then retreating to his apartment in order to get away from his new-made, and rather inconsiderate friends—the veteran Joe Bowers did, and, as he proudly exclaimed, when some one made the remark that it was his opinion Talbot was not "treating the boys right" by refusing to accept their hospitality:

"Hyer's the durned ole fat, lusty galoot w'ot is able to stand up to the bar and h'ist any kind of bug-juice, red, white, or yaller, and don't bar no licker on account of its color."

"My friend, Mr. Talbot—whom I reckon I must have seen afore, for it strikes me I run afoul of him somewhar in Californy, up on the Feather River, if I don't disremember, some time in the Sixties—is not a man who keers to practice much at the bar, but, that is the best bolt of yours truly, and if any of you galoots think you kin lay me out, I dare ye to the combat!"

This challenge was promptly accepted, and, although the veteran made a gallant struggle, yet the potent liquor of the Metropolitan was administered in such doses that the "ole original" was at last forced to knock under, and a crowd of sympathizing friends bore him away.

But though the veteran was so overcome that he had lost the use of both arms and legs, yet he was not oblivious to what was going on around him.

"That's right, boys," he muttered with thickened tongue as the crowd proceeded to assist him; "allers carry off the dead and wounded. Gimme a room close to my ole pard, Dick Talbot, 'ca'se if anything happens to me, I kinder want him around."

The crowd complied with this wish, and deposited Bowers in a room next to that occupied by Talbot, as they informed him.

After being placed upon the bed, Bowers gave a grunt of satisfaction.

"All right, O. K., you bet! Do as much for you some time, for I'm the man from Shasta who never goes back on a pard! I'm the clear white article, the original ole Joe Bowers!" and closing his eyes, he apparently sunk at once into a deep slumber.

The crowd withdrew, and after they had departed a sudden transformation occurred. The drunken stupor disappeared and Bowers rose to a sitting posture, all traces of intoxication having vanished.

He listened for a moment to satisfy himself that no one was in the hall without, then at once proceeded to Talbot's room and tapped upon the door.

"Who is it?" Talbot inquired, always cautious.

"It's me, the noblest Roman of them all, me noble dook—ole Joe Bowers!" the bummer replied, in a low voice.

The door was unbolted at once, and the applicant admitted.

"Hallo, hallo!" Dick exclaimed, as Joe Bowers marched in with his usual good-natured grin. "I thought they had put you to bed with all the honors."

"So they did, me royal nibs," responded Bowers, taking a seat upon the bed as he spoke; "leastways, to speak by the keerd for fear 'equivocation may undo us,' the gang reckoned

they had flabbergasted youn to command, but I reckon the old original Joe Bowers is not the guileless youth his fair proportions would seem to indicate.

"The galoots went in to git me as full as a tick, and, as a rule, old pard, whenever any one starts in to work *that* game I makes it a rule not to disapp'int 'em."

"To-day I had two riffles to work; the furst was to let 'em think they were men enuff to floor the man from Shasta in a fair stand-up fight afore a bar. That flatters their pride and makes me solid with *them*. The second riffle was to locate a room without being obliged to show the color of my money, for, to tell you the truth, old pard, I'm about bu'sted. If gold-mines were selling for five dollars apiece, it would bother me to pay for more than a fifth interest into one."

"How does that happen?" Talbot inquired. "In the old time you always made a point of having a slug or two sewed up in some secure place about your clothes."

"Right you are, me noble dook; that is the way I usually work the racket, and the way I calculated to work it this time; but the best-laid schemes of mice and men don't allers hitch so as to turn up a winning card."

"I have jest come from Tombstone—ever been thar, pard?"

Talbot shook his head.

"No, but I was on my way there when I happened to strike this camp by reason of taking the wrong trail."

"Wal, it is a lucky thing for you that the accident happened, for I tell you, pard, thar is no money in Tombstone for any sport; the biz is overdone; thar is two sharps to every one pilgrim, and all the boys kin do is to skin one another to pass away the time, but thar isn't any money in that, you know."

"No, not much."

"Wal, as I was saying, I hung 'round Tombstone, the luck running dead ag'in' me all the time, until I was down to my last fiver; then I heerd of this camp as having a boom and I lit out for it."

"You see, I had a twenty-dollar slug sewed in my clothes and I relied on that to gi'n me a start; but, would you believe it, old pard, when I came to go for it the gold-piece had cut through the cloth and was gone!"

"That was a piece of bad luck."

"Yes, for I ain't got a dollar."

"Well, I am about broke, too, for I've only got ten left."

And as he spoke Talbot took out two five-dollar gold-pieces and gave one to Bowers who received it with a profound bow.

"There! With five dollars to start on two such men as you and I ought not to starve in any kind of a lively camp."

"You bet!" cried the bummer, emphatically.

"And, from what I have seen of the boyees of this camp, I reckon I can not only pick up a living, but make a small fortune out of them in the next two or three months."

"Say! It was kinder lucky, pard, wasn't it, that I should happen to strike the town jest in time to take a hand in that leetle Lynch picnic?" Bowers observed, abruptly.

"Yes, it was a narrow squeeze."

"How was it that they pitched upon you?"

"Well I don't know, but I intend to find out," Talbot replied, a glint of fire in his keen eyes.

"It appears to me as if I was selected for a victim, although it may be pure plundering. One thing is certain: if I had been hanged for the murder of this Maxwell the town would make no further effort to solve the mystery of the assassination."

"Looks kinder as if the man, or men, who did the job were engineering the charge of murder ag'in' you," observed Bowers, with his wonted shrewdness.

"Yes; and I have made up my mind to go for the assassin, red-hot, too!" Dick Talbot exclaimed, with firm determination.

"The furst trick is to find out *why* he was killed," Bowers observed, entering upon the matter with all the professional eagerness of the trained man-hunter.

"Yes, you are right; that is the first matter for attention. The young mine-owner was not killed by any foe to him unknown; his dying words, which t e ignorant fools supposed to be addressed to me, satisfy me in regard to *that*, and that the man who killed him was an old-time foe—one he feared would some day work him harm."

"Oh, yes, sure as ye'r born!" Bowers assented.

And then a sudden thought occurred to him.

"I say, Dick, my royal nibs, that reminds me: I heered a leetle talk in the bar-room, when the crowd was h'isting thar p'ison, 'bout that bold gal who came to the fore with her barkers so promptly. Some of the gang kinder seemed to allow that *she* might have something to do with it, and that was the reason she interfered to save you, being mighty certain that you hadn't any hand in the murder."

"This suspicion was openly discussed among the miners, then?" said Talbot, evidently impressed, and attaching considerable importance to the statement.

"Wal, not exactly openly, 'cos it was kinder whispered 'round."

"What connection was there between the two—what motive had the girl to kill him?"

"Cording to the talk, thar was a love affair between the two—the gal runs the crack shebang of the town, the Golden Hairpin—mebbe you noticed it; it is right across the street?"

"Yes, I saw the sign, and I thought it was the queerest title for a saloon I had ever met, and yet, I have run across some queer ranches in my time."

"Some of the boys have noticed that thar was a coldness between the two lately, and the report is 'round that Maxwell went back on the gal, arter agreeing to marry her, mebbe, and if that is true, she would have a good reason for plugging him."

"It will bear looking into, but I don't take much stock in the suspicion."

"I'm with you, pard, to the death!" the old bummer assured; "if Dick Talbot an' ole Joe Bowers can't work the racket then I'm a grave-digger!"

And griping Talbot's hand for a warm "shake," the "original Joe" departed.

There was work to do, and it was two against the whole town, but who ever knew Dick Talbot to count the odds whenever on the trail?

CHAPTER X.

AN EXAMINATION.

AFTER Talbot and the greater part of the crowd had gone to the hotel, the mayor and marshal went to the store of the former.

They proceeded to the private room, and when there, safe from observation, White gave vent to the disgust he felt.

"Well, old man, we made the worst kind of a break, hey?"

"Yes, about as complete a failure, take the affair from beginning to end, as I ever had anything to do with."

"This fellow will have it in for two men about our size now," the mayor suggested.

A dark look came over the face of the marshal and he tapped the butt of one of his revolvers significantly.

"You think you kin take care of him, hey?"

"If he tries to monkey around me I certainly will do my best to put him where the dogs will not be likely to bite him," Black Mac observed, with grim determination.

"I tried him once, but I didn't make out very well," the mayor remarked, with a grimace which did not improve the looks of his disfigured face.

"Well, because the man is a good boxer, it does not follow that he is an expert with weapons."

"No, but almost all of these sports are, you know."

"I will risk this fellow being able to hold his own with me when it comes to a shooting-match," and the marshal had reason to feel confident, for he had been concerned in a number of encounters since No Man's Camp "had a local habitation and a name," and had been skillful or lucky enough to prove the victor in all of them.

"Wal, I hope you will be able to down him if it comes to a fight," the mayor observed, somewhat dubiously.

"I will admit that I have had about all of the cuss that I want. I would like to get squar' with him, of course, but I can tell you that I don't go into another fight with him without all the advantage is on my side."

"Well, I will try to have the matter fixed in that shape when I sail in, although I am not in the least afraid of his being a better man than I am with the pistol."

"I say, couldn't we arrange some plan to make No Man's Camp too hot for this galoot?" the mayor inquired.

"It would be worth trying some head-work on, and if you strike any plan, let me know, and if I hit upon anything I will shoot off my mouth to you mighty quick; but I must be off now. I am going to the Maxwell place to examine matters."

"Yes, and I say, if it should turn out that Maxwell was careless enough to lose the receipts I gave him, you and a party about my size will be a few thousand dollars richer," and the mayor gave his confederate a meaning look.

"Yes, and from what I know of Maxwell's affairs I reckon we are as safe to get the money as though it was already in our pockets, for I feel pretty certain that those receipts will never turn up to bother anybody. And, by the way, if you have any talk with anybody, look out what you say about the ownership of the property."

"Oh, you kin trust me to keep a still tongue in my head!" the mayor asserted, confidently. "I am one of the kind who never gives anything away."

"Maxwell was a still fellow, too, and right at the beginning he asked me to keep our agreement in regard to the mine a secret. It was nobody's business and he was anxious that not a soul in the camp should know exactly how he stood."

"I see, I see. Well, I must be off; take care

of yourself until I see you again. By the way, some raw beef would be good for those black eyes; you can't have any idea how handsome you look with them."

Which joke caused the mayor to utter some very forcible remarks concerning the strange sport who had so deftly ornamented his frontispiece; and the marshal departed, grinning.

From the mayor's office, Black Mac proceeded directly to the Heather Bell property.

Diantha was expecting him. By this time the girl had in a measure recovered from the shock which had fallen so unexpectedly upon her, and was more like herself than she had been, on the night before.

The first thing the marshal did was to relate to her the particulars of the trial, winding up with the declaration that, notwithstanding the prisoner had not been found guilty, there was not much doubt about his guilt; and hinting that it was his belief the stranger had been hired to do the bloody deed.

The girl could not repress a shudder as the loss which she had sustained was so vividly brought back to mind; and, although MacGregor spoke in a guarded way, she did not fail to comprehend that his suspicion was directed against the dashing California girl who called herself 'Frisco Nell.

When the marshal finished his recital, Diantha astonished him by detailing the particulars of the nocturnal attack which had been made upon her.

The marshal listened with the utmost amazement.

"This is a most strange affair," he declared. "Why, the scoundrels hardly waited until your brother was cold before they made their raid, but you say you do not think they found the real hiding-place?"

"No, I do not, for I feel satisfied that Donald must have had considerable money in the house, yet, from the way the outlaws grumbled about the smallness of the booty which they secured, it seems evident they did not find it."

"So it would appear; but, let us get to work and see. Have you made any examination?"

"No, I waited for your coming."

"Well, that was best."

Then Diantha produced from the hole in the back of the fire-place the tin cracker-box in which her brother kept his revolvers.

MacGregor emptied the contents of the box upon the table, and there were so few things in the receptacle that it did not take long for the examination.

But little money was found. There was a buckskin bag containing, according to the marshal's estimate, about fifty dollars. Then there was a receipt from the Express Company for a hundred dollars, and a receipt from Mayor Gideon White for a similar amount, stated to be the first payment on the Heather Bell property.

A few letters were also there, but nothing of interest was discovered in them.

"Well, well, upon my soul this looks as if your brother's affairs were in a bad way!" MacGregor exclaimed, in a tone of much concern.

"Do you suppose the robbers could have found this box and taken any valuables out of it?" Diantha asked.

"Oh, no; the fact that the bag of money is here is proof that the fellows did not discover the box, for they would never have left such a sum of money behind, and the Express receipt, too, the fellows would have taken, with the idea, you know, that they could raise money on it."

"Yes, undoubtedly," the girl assented. "I know they were disappointed by the smallness of the plunder, for the man who seemed to be the leader complained to me that they had not got enough to pay for their trouble."

"Did you examine the other hiding-place of which you spoke—the dummy one—to see if they had taken what was there?" Black Mac asked.

"No, I did not; but I will now."

And she immediately proceeded to do so.

This treasure receptacle on the other side of the fire-place had been ransacked and all articles of value taken.

"It is as I suspected, then," the marshal remarked, when this fact was discovered. "The fellows were deceived by the decoy hiding-place, and did not succeed in finding the real one."

"Well, I am sorry your brother did not leave you better-fixed," Black Mac continued, after a pause, "but you need not let that trouble you, for I will see that you have everything you want."

"You are very kind," Diantha observed.

"Oh, well, I hope to get my pay one of these days, you know,"—a speech which called the blushes to the girl's cheeks.

"I don't like the looks of this mine business," the marshal continued, glancing in a thoughtful way at the receipt for the hundred dollars which he held in his hand. "I was in hopes that your brother had paid for the property and that it was free and clear, but this looks as if he had only paid a hundred on it."

"I do not understand it, for from what I have

heard Donald say I was sure there was only a trifle due on the property."

"There was no reason why he should want to deceive you about the matter?" the marshal said, in a questioning way.

"Oh, no, for I never troubled myself about his business in any way—never questioned him, and whatever he told me was of his own free will; but I feel certain that he had nearly paid for the mine, and the receipts must be in existence somewhere."

"I will do the best I can to find out. Mayor White was the man who sold your brother the mine, and although the mayor is a shrewd fellow, and a hard man to deal with, yet, as I have a good deal of influence with him, I will be able to do as well as anybody. I will have a talk with him as soon as I can, and in a cautious way find out how much of the mine he owns."

And then, as if the idea had just occurred to him, he added:

"It would be a good notion for me to buy all of his claim that he cares to sell."

"Yes, I should think so," the girl assented, her heart swelling with gratitude at the kindness displayed by the marshal.

"I will not let the grass grow beneath my feet, but will hunt up White at once. Don't you worry; everything will come out all right. I can save the mining property for you beyond a doubt, and there's no fear in my mind but what, in time, I can discover and bring to justice the assassin who slew your brother."

"Oh, I shall never be able to repay your kindness!" Diantha exclaimed, gratefully.

"Yes, yes, you will one of these days; goodbye for the present," and the scoundrel departed, quite happy over his seeming progress in his scheme.

For a good half-hour Diantha remained absorbed in thought; then she was roused by a knock at the door.

She opened it and was confronted by a tall, handsome girl, elegantly dressed, whom, from the description, she recognized at once as the lady sport, 'Frisco Nell.

"You are Diantha Maxwell?"

"I am."

"Then I've something important to say to you!"

CHAPTER XI.

A STRANGE STATEMENT.

'FRISCO NELL advanced as she spoke, and Diantha, completely astonished, retreated in a mechanical way, hardly knowing what she was doing.

When she was within the house 'Frisco Nell closed the door.

"You will excuse my taking the liberty," she said, "but I have come to talk with you upon important matters, and it is extremely necessary that our conversation shall neither be interrupted nor overheard."

'Frisco Nell had a brisk, business-like way with her and came directly to the point.

"I judge from the expression upon your face that you know who I am," 'Frisco Nell continued.

Diantha by this time had recovered her composure and she inclined her head in a cold and distant way.

'Frisco Nell saw that the other was not disposed to be friendly and a contemptuous smile flitted quickly across her face.

"And from the way you receive me I have a suspicion that you have not the best opinion in the world of a lady about my size."

Diantha hesitated for a moment before she replied, but her Scotch blood was aroused by the manner of the other and she exclaimed:

"I scorn to stoop to deception, and I will not deny that there is hardly a person in the world who would be less welcome in my house than yourself."

"Good! I like that—that is honest!" cried the female sport, in her quick, abrupt way.

"That is the way to talk—no beating about the bush, but coming down to rank business every time."

"You and I will get on together, for I am just as frank and honest as you are, although I say it, who should not."

"You tell me plainly that I am as unwelcome a guest as could darken your door; what will you say when I tell you that for the last three months I have had the chance of entering this house and reigning as its mistress?"

For a moment a look of profound amazement appeared on the face of Diantha, and then it rapidly gave way to cold disdain!

"I should be apt to say that I do not believe it," she replied.

"Three months ago your brother asked me to be his wife, and when I told him in the frankest possible manner that, from what I had heard of you, I did not believe this house would be big enough to hold both of us, he answered that the world did not know you as you really are—that you were not a cold, haughty, self-willed creature, as was generally believed, but the dearest, the most generous, and the kindest-hearted girl in existence, and when you came to know me,

and understood how much the happiness of his life centered upon my becoming his wife, you would be glad to receive me as a sister."

Diantha's face grew hard and white, indignant fires blazed in her eyes and her proud lip curled in contempt.

"I do not believe this tale!" she declared.

"Well, now, do you know I didn't think you would," and Frisco Nell gave utterance to a contemptuous laugh.

"I said to myself, right at the beginning, when I thought of coming to see you, 'Nell, this Scotch girl, will set down this yarn of yours for a ghost-story right from the word, go. If you tell her that her brother, whom she thought so much of, was so infatuated with you that he was willing—nay, madly anxious to take you from your position in the Golden Hairpin Saloon, from behind the faro table, over which you reign, and place you as the presiding angel of his house, cheek by jowl with the pure vestal sister who holds herself so proudly aloof from the contaminations of this wild Western camp, she will never believe it in the world.'"

"It is the truth—I do not believe it!"

"Well, although I am a great believer in frankness, and like all with whom I come in contact to deal honestly with me, yet for all that it is not pleasant to be told that I am a liar right to my teeth!"

The gentle breeding of Diantha caused her to feel annoyed at the position in which she found herself.

"You have placed me in a most unpleasant position; I am a lady, I trust, and I do not like to descend to coarse language like a fish-woman," she said.

"Oh, I trust that neither one of us will do that," the other replied. "Although I suppose I must admit that under the spur of the moment I spoke very plainly."

"I can see by your manner that you are a lady both by birth and education, possibly that is more than you are willing to say of Frisco Nell, the female sport, who runs the Golden Hairpin Saloon, and yet it is the truth."

"I am a Californian by birth, the daughter of one of the old cattle kings, who counted both his beeves and his acres by the thousand."

"To womanhood I came with wealth galore at my command, I was educated at the finest convent school that the Pacific Slope can boast, and there was not any advantage which money could purchase which was denied me."

"From that proud estate to the position which I now hold was quite a descent, eh? and whether it was my fault and sin, or the fault and sin of another—whether I was victim or willing-prey, is a question now which concerns myself alone—in it the world has no part, and I am an idiot to allow the scorn which you so openly manifest to tempt me into speaking of the past, which is dead and gone."

"But it doesn't matter—it is over now, and we will let it rest."

"It is the question of whether I have spoken truth or falsehood which is now before the meeting, and with that question alone we will deal."

"Your brother was so infatuated that he would have really persecuted me with his attentions if I had been one of the kind of women who could be persecuted, although from the very first I told him that there was not the least chance for him, and I was frank enough to tell him why, too, although it was not a pleasant thing to do."

"I told him that in the first place I did not care for him. He was a pleasant acquaintance, but as a lover he did not fill the bill at all. Then, too, I saw that he was getting to be more and more the slave of liquor. The habit was growing on him, and above all things in this world I hate a man who has not sense enough to stop drinking when he knows that the liquor is doing him an injury."

If she could possibly have done so with a due regard for truth, Diantha would have indignantly denied this allegation, but the statement was an honest one.

Almost every night for the last month, when Donald Maxwell returned to his home, he was more or less under the influence of strong drink.

But, woman-like, Diantha was unreasonable, and as she could not deny the statement, she attempted to break its force by a counter-accusation.

"Possibly it was to curry favor with you that he drank!" she exclaimed. "You dealt in the poison, and perhaps he thought he would win your favor by drinking."

"Oh, yes, of course, as if I cared whether he spent a dollar in my place or not!" Frisco Nell exclaimed, contemptuously.

"As a fact, he spent very little money in my place for liquor, for he knew what I thought about it."

"But now to settle the question of whether I have spoken truth or falsehood when I say that your brother was mad to make me his wife; have the kindness to read this letter which he wrote to me last night, only a few hours before he met his death."

"He wrote, because I had grown impatient with him for pressing his suit and had told him

that I would not listen to any more talk on the subject."

Diantha, astounded by this statement, took the letter which Frisco Nell tendered and carefully perused it.

It had been written by her brother; there was no doubt about it, and was a love-letter of the most glowing description.

He offered, if Frisco Nell would consent to become his wife, to sell out his interests in No Man's Camp and take her to any part of the world to which she cared to go, where no one would be apt to know anything about her past life; in fact, there was no sacrifice too great for him to make if he could only secure her for his own, he said in conclusion.

It was plain that the spell which this dark-eyed siren had thrown upon him was a most powerful one.

Diantha was thoroughly amazed, and her face fully betrayed her feelings as she returned the letter.

"Well, did I speak the truth or not?" Frisco Nell demanded.

"You did, but without some such proof as this I would not have believed it."

"Now, then, let me try and impress upon you, right at the beginning, that I am going to try and act honestly with you!" the dashing young woman exclaimed, impressively.

"I have come to see you upon a weighty matter, and I want you to believe that every word I speak is the truth."

"I did not love your brother, but I am going to do my best to hunt down his murderer!"

CHAPTER XII.

'FRISCO NELL SECURES AN ALLY.

DIANTHA looked at her visitor with amazement written upon her countenance, for the announcement was entirely unsuspected by her.

"Oh, I mean exactly what I say!" Frisco Nell asserted. "And I will spare no pains to accomplish my object."

"I have no doubt you have heard all the particulars in regard to the trial of this stranger—this man Talbot—who was supposed to be the assassin."

"Yes, I have."

"There was a strong attempt made to convict him, although the evidence against the man was not enough upon which to hang a dog, and the parties who desired this stranger's death apparently anticipated that the evidence would not be strong enough to condemn him, and so they arranged for Judge Lynch to take a hand in the game; the scheme did not work, though, and the sport escaped."

"I have my ideas in regard to who killed your brother, and why he was killed, and, apart from any liking that I may have had for him, I am spurred into taking up this matter because reports have been set afloat that I had a hand in the tragedy."

And as she spoke Frisco Nell watched Diantha's face with the eyes of a hawk.

Diantha was not skilled in discrimination, and she could not prevent her features from betraying that she was not astonished by this intelligence.

"It is as I thought!" Frisco Nell exclaimed, after a moment's pause, "this is no news to you; some one has whispered to you that I had a hand in causing your brother's death."

For a few seconds Diantha hesitated, but falsehood was foreign to her nature, and then, too, she saw no good reason why she should not speak the truth about the matter.

"You are right in your surmise," she said, "it has been intimated to me that you might have had something to do with the tragedy."

"And I think I know the party who gave you the information: the same man has been quietly circulating the report around the camp. He has acted cunningly about the matter, for he knows well enough that if the report came to my knowledge, and I succeeded in getting a clew as to who was the author, I would be apt to try and make it warm for him. I have friends in the camp as well as this party who is trying to injure me, and, in spite of all his cunning endeavors to circulate the report in such a way that I would not be able to find out who started it, I managed to get on the right track, and the first thing he knows I will call him to an account."

Diantha was astonished by the energy of the other, and the thought came to her that she was the most masculine girl she had ever encountered.

"Possibly the one who made the statement believed that it was the truth," she ventured to remark.

"Oh, no, he did not!" Frisco Nell exclaimed, immediately. "The man who insinuated that I had aught to do with your brother's murder knew that it was a falsehood when he uttered the remark, and I feel pretty sure too that I know why he wanted to attach suspicion to me."

Again Diantha looked amazed, for the statement astonished her.

"I cannot possibly conceive why any one should wish to injure you by circulating such a report unless they honestly believed it," Diantha observed.

"Well, it is odd, of course, but I think I know the reason, and one of these days, perhaps, you will know too. But now to come to the point: you were told that I was suspected of having something to do with the killing of your brother, and the reason I desired his death was because I tried to entrap his love, and when I saw I could not succeed in so doing, and he began to grow cold, I wanted revenge because he avoided me."

"Now this letter shows you that that was not true. I could have been your brother's wife if I had so desired, and the coolness which arose between us was due to me and not to him. Now I hope I have made it plain to you that I had no reason to desire to injure your brother."

"Yes, it is clear to me now."

"It was your brother who had the grievance, not I, and the story that I sought to be revenged upon him is utterly ridiculous. In fact, I was doing all I could to make a better man out of him, and the last time I saw him under the influence of liquor I told him that if he couldn't come into my place sober he had better stay away altogether."

The face of Diantha softened; she believed the other to be speaking the truth, and although she could not understand why such a girl would not be glad to gain the love of a man like her brother, yet she was thankful to find there was no truth in the horrid surmise which had been made about her.

"Well, now that I have explained matters to you I will vamoose," Frisco Nell remarked. "I was determined that you should know the truth. I am very far from being an angel, still I am not a murderess, and since an attempt has been made to blacken my reputation I will try and see if I cannot bring to justice the real doer of the bloody deed."

"You are also interested, even more than I, and if you set your wits to work, there is no doubt that in time we will get at the truth."

"A parting caution: trust no one, no matter how much the party may protest their desire to serve you; keep your own counsel and your eyes and ears open; should you happen to strike a clew, do not hesitate to send for me; good-by!"

And Frisco Nell took her departure as abruptly as she had come, leaving Diantha a prey to wondering thoughts.

Nell proceeded directly to her saloon.

By this time the excitement attending the trial had quieted down and the camp resumed its normal midday appearance.

Like all mining-towns of its kind, during working hours it was almost deserted, the male inhabitants being away at work on their claims in the neighboring gulches.

Only the bummers, who were too lazy to work, and the sports, who preyed on the hard-handed sons of toil, were usually to be found in the town until the sun went down, and the majority of these men generally slept the greater part of the day, as they were up nearly all night.

The Golden Hairpin was deserted; Billy Robinson, the "genial bartender," and "Old Man Finnegan," the "bouncer" of the establishment, whose duty it was to keep order by ejecting any customer who showed a disposition to make trouble, were enjoying a pipe and a social game of cards when Frisco Nell entered.

Like the majority of the people engaged in business in the town the girl had a private room at the back of the saloon where she slept, getting her meals at the hotel.

As the trial of Talbot had taken place right in front of the saloon, both of the Golden Hairpin men had had a good view of the affair, and Frisco Nell knew they were acquainted with the accused.

"Billy, I want to see that man who had so narrow a squeeze for his life," the mistress of the Golden Hairpin remarked. "Suppose you go over to the hotel and get a chance to tell him quietly that I want to see him."

"All right," responded the barkeeper, and then happening to cast a glance out of the window he saw Talbot approaching.

"He's coming across the street now, and I reckon he's bound for hyer!" the barkeeper announced.

A few moments and Dick Talbot made his appearance.

CHAPTER XIII.

A NOVEL PROPOSITION.

THE barkeeper and the bouncer nodded in the most friendly manner, for they understood that the mistress of the Golden Hairpin took an interest in the good-looking stranger, and being devotedly attached to the girl, who was one of the most indulgent of employers, they were always ready to do anything they could for any friend of hers.

At the further end of the saloon, remote from the door, was a card-table, surrounded by chairs; a curtain was arranged on a wire in such a way as to screen the space occupied by the table from observation.

This curtained nook was the nightly resort of the sports who imagined they were "big poker chiefs," but who did not desire to play in the midst of a crowd.

When it was announced that Talbot was approaching, 'Frisco Nell proceeded to this poker-table and seated herself, first drawing the curtain so as to partially screen the corner.

"I would like to say a few words to the lovely boss of the ranch," Talbot remarked after entering the saloon and glancing around in search of 'Frisco Nell, whom he did not perceive owing to her being hid by the curtain.

"She is yonder in the corner," the barkeeper replied.

And at that moment 'Frisco Nell pulled the curtain to one side so she could be seen.

Talbot advanced toward her, bowing politely as he came up.

"I have called to thank you for the service you did me," he said.

"Oh, don't mention it," she replied, smiling sweetly, and yet at the same time fixing a penetrating look upon him with her brilliant eyes as though she would read his very soul.

"Sit down and make yourself comfortable," she continued, waving her hand to a chair. "Do you know you are just the man I wanted to see?"

"Well, I am glad I came then," he remarked, seating himself.

'Frisco Nell adjusted the curtain so as to secure them from the observation of any one who might chance to come into the saloon.

"There, now we can converse without danger of attracting attention," she observed.

"This camp is just like a little country village—full of gossips, and if it became known that we were holding a little quiet conversation here in a corner it would be a nine-days' wonder."

"No doubt about it. I came, as I said, to thank you for the bold stand you took in my behalf."

"Oh, but I saw that it was not an honest movement," the girl exclaimed. "It was a cut-and-dried job. I have lived too long in a mining-camp not to know the difference between a genuine Judge Lynch movement and a bogus affair. I could see that there were only three or four men who were in earnest, although of course there were plenty of idle scamps ready to take up the lynch cry; but the mass of the people were not roused."

"Yes, it looked to me as if certain parties, being satisfied that they would not be able to convict me if I had any show at all for my life, got up this lynch business so as to get me out of the way."

"But why should anybody desire your death?" 'Frisco Nell asked, shrewdly. "You are a stranger in this camp; no one seems to know you and how can it be possible that you can have enemies here?"

"That is a riddle," Talbot replied. "I did not have any until I struck the town, but now I reckon I have a couple who will do their best to make life uncomfortable for me."

"The mayor and the marshal!" 'Frisco Nell exclaimed.

"Yes, they are the men, and the mayor has more reason to be my enemy than the other, for when he tried to force me into a confession I handled him pretty roughly."

"Black Mac, the marshal, bears the reputation of being one of the shrewdest men in the camp, and he would not bear malice against you without there was a reason for it."

"Of course not. I understand that, and the fact has bothered me."

"The only explanation I can arrive at is that he really bears me no personal ill-will, but is desirous of bringing to justice the man who killed this Donald Maxwell, and if I was hanged for the crime it would fill the bill, no matter whether I was guilty or not."

"Has any idea come up in your mind as to why the marshal is so anxious to have some one hung for this murder?" 'Frisco Nell asked, pointedly.

"Oh, yes; I am no boy in the ways of the world, having seen a good deal of life since I started out on my own hook, and when this man seemed determined to put me through, I immediately began to speculate as to why he was so anxious, and the conclusion I reached was that he either knew, or suspected, who did the deed, and was anxious to shield the murderer."

"If I was convicted and hung for the crime, it would be apt to stop all inquiry into the matter."

'Frisco Nell nodded.

"You think my suspicion is not far from the truth?" Talbot asked.

"I am satisfied that you have judged correctly in regard to Black Mac's motive," the girl replied, decidedly. "You have guessed his little game, as I did, right at the beginning. He is a deep fellow—this same Black Mac, and the man who desires to get ahead of him must rise early in the morning. As you are a stranger here, I suppose you are not aware that this poor fellow who was so cruelly murdered was an ardent admirer of mine?"

"Oh, yes; short as has been my sojourn in the town, I have heard a good deal of gossip, and I know, too, that it is whispered around that your motive for interfering in my behalf was due to the fact of your knowing who did

the deed, and thereby being certain that I had no hand in it."

'Frisco Nell's brow contracted, and a dark look appeared on her face.

"And they hint also, do they not, that I was the party who instigated the foul crime?"

"Well, yes, such whispers are abroad."

"I was angry at being deserted, and sought revenge?"

"So runs the tale."

"And what think you?" demanded the girl, in an imperious way, fixing her brilliant eyes full on the face of the other.

"I don't take the least stock in the story," Talbot replied, promptly.

"You are a stranger to me, and of course I do not know much of anything about you, but as I have traveled pretty extensively, and have seen a good deal of human nature, I flatter myself I am a fair judge of character, and you are not the kind of girl, I take it, to worry yourself about a thing of that kind; you are too proud to trouble your head about a lover's desertion."

"Read this letter and judge whether I was deserted or not," and 'Frisco Nell gave to Talbot the note which was the last that Donald Maxwell had penned on earth.

Talbot perused the letter, then returned it with the remark:

"It is clear that you had no motive to kill the man."

"No, not the slightest, but I have a motive now to find out who *did* it!" the girl exclaimed, with flashing eyes.

"Yes, that is natural under the circumstances, and in looking carefully into the matter it seems to me that the real assassin would be just the man to start a report implicating you so as to cover up his tracks."

"My own idea exactly, and as this contemptible piece of work has been done, I am determined to be revenged by bringing the murderer to justice."

"Have you any idea as to who the man is?" Talbot asked. "Any clew to go upon?"

"Yes, I have; there was one man in this camp in whose way Donald Maxwell stood; a single man who had a motive to kill him, and there is not any doubt in my mind that that man did the deed, although he may not have fired the fatal shot himself, for from his position he comes in contact with all the desperadoes of the camp, and it would be an easy matter for him to get some one of them to commit the murder."

"This is a rough town, you know, the refuge of all kinds of criminals. No questions are asked here in regard to what a man has done, and it is safe to say that out of every ten men you meet in this camp, for nine of them the doors of some jail are yawning wide."

"I reckon I have a suspicion in regard to the man you are hinting at myself," Talbot remarked. "I will not mention any name at present, but wait until I have secured some proof."

"You said in reply to the mayor's warning to quit the town that you would not go until you had discovered who killed Donald Maxwell," the girl remarked, thoughtfully.

"Yes, and I meant every word I said, too," Dick Talbot replied, in his quiet way, yet which was so full of determination.

"We have a common interest, then—would you mind having a woman pard? I need a man like yourself, for although I have some good, true friends in this camp, men who will back my quarrel to the death, yet they are not the kind of fellows to handle an intricate matter like this."

"Not at all; I shall be glad of your aid," and Talbot extended his hand, which was at once grasped by 'Frisco Nell in the frankest and most cordial manner.

"From this day out we are pards!" she exclaimed; "and if we put our wits to work we will be sure to trap the cowardly assassin who killed Donald Maxwell!"

"Now then, to come right down to business, how are you situated? Do you need money? Being pards, you know, we must help each other."

"Well, I cannot say that I am particularly flush at present, but as I am counted a pretty good short-card player, I hope to add to my wealth by relieving some of the sports of this camp of their surplus funds."

"You will not find any difficulty about getting into a game," the girl observed. "This is the poker-table, where we are now sitting, and a good big game is usually played here every night; but you will need considerable money, for it is a dollar-ante game generally, and the betting usually runs high."

"Well, that is rather a high-toned game," Talbot observed. "And I do not believe I have wealth enough to back me; still, as I am usually lucky at the faro-table, and though I have only five dollars to start in with, there is a chance for me to win enough to go into the poker game."

'Frisco Nell shook her head.

"Faro is not like poker, you know," she remarked. "Although a woman I can calculate the chances as well as any sport that ever lived."

"Oh, yes, I understand that; I am an old hand at the bellows. Faro depends more upon luck than skill, while at poker a man who is an expert player can often with inferior hands beat opponents who do not understand the game as well as he does."

"Very true; now, it seems to me that there is not any use of your wasting your time at faro with only a fiver to start on," 'Frisco Nell remarked. "Let me lend you a hundred and then you can go into the poker game, and if you are a big chief, you can come out a thousand or so ahead. Don't hesitate to take the money, for we are pards, you know, and a pair of true pards should have only one purse between them. If our positions were reversed and I needed the money, I can assure you I would not hesitate for a moment in taking the loan from you."

"You are right; but suppose I should lose instead of win?"

"That is the fortune of war," she answered. "I have faith enough in you to back your game, and even if the hundred be lost, there is plenty more where that comes from."

"All right; I will take it then in the same free spirit in which it is offered."

"That is the way to talk!" 'Frisco Nell exclaimed. "Oh, I feel sure that we will get on famously together."

Then the girl counted the hundred dollars into Talbot's hand.

Hardly had this operation been performed when into the saloon stalked Leadville Mat and a couple of his pards. This ruffian, the reader will remember, was the man who wanted to act as Judge Lynch.

"Whar is this Dick Talbot?" he yelled.

CHAPTER XIV.

A LITTLE DIFFICULTY.

THAT Leadville Mat had entered the saloon with no peaceful intent was apparent, for there was war in the tone of his voice.

The curtain being drawn, the pair at the poker-table were concealed from view, so that when the new-comer glanced around in search of the sport he was not able to discover him.

"Whar is the durned galoot?" the desperado exclaimed. "I seed him come in hyer, and I know he didn't come out, for I have had my peepers onto the door all the time."

"Oh, what is the matter with you?" the barkeeper inquired.

"Some things bit you, eh?" added the bouncer.

Talbot had cast an inquiring glance at 'Frisco Nell when the speech of Leadville Mat fell upon his ears, and she quickly explained who the fellow was.

"Leadville Mat," she said, "a particular friend of the marshal and reputed to be one of the most dangerous desperadoes in the town. He is the man who led the party that wanted to lynch you—a big fellow with a lariat in his hand."

"Ah, yes, I remember him, and I suppose he is seeking trouble now."

"Yes, it looks like it."

"Well, I suppose I will have to accommodate him, for in all matters of this kind it is always best to take the bull by the horns."

Leadville Mat had been glancing around the room, puzzled to know what had become of the sport.

"Say, did that galoot waltz out of the back door?" he demanded. "Did he git the idee that thar was a gentleman of 'bout my size on the war-path, and thet it wouldn't be healthy for him if I got a chance to git in some o' my fine work?"

That the desperado had come into the saloon ready for mischief was plain, for although his revolvers were in their holsters yet, the hammers of both of them were drawn back, ready for action.

"I wanter to see ther durned galoot—I wanter make him hunt his hole, and I am the man who kin do it, too, for I am all fight from the crown of my head to the sole of my feet—I'm the worst man to tackle that thar is in this hull durned camp! I am the big chief, I am, and I have fixed more men for planting than any other two-legged critter from hyer to nowhar!"

"I will really have to try and see how much of this fellow is wind and how much solid stuff," Talbot remarked, slipping one of his revolvers out of its holster.

"Look out for him!" 'Frisco Nell continued. "He bears the reputation of being a dangerous fellow, and is said to be wonderfully quick on the draw."

"Well, I am not slow myself," was Talbot's comment.

Then pushing aside the curtain, he stepped forth, much to the amazement of the desperado, who had not taken notice that the curtain was drawn in the poker corner, but had jumped to the conclusion, not seeing the man of whom he was in search, that the strange sport had departed through the back door.

"Are you the man who wants to see Dick Talbot?" was the inquiry that Talbot made as he stepped from behind the curtain and faced the ruffian, who was some fifteen feet distant, standing by the side of the bar.

As we have said Talbot had drawn his revolver, and being a self-cocking tool he had no need to raise the hammer, but it was not apparent that he was ready for war, for he held his hand down by his side in such a way that the weapon was concealed.

"You are my meat!" howled the desperado, reaching for his weapon with wonderful quickness, but Dick Talbot was quicker still, for before Leadville Mat could get his revolver out of its holster Talbot had him "covered."

"Don't pull or I'll bore you!" was the warning given.

The desperado, with his hand on his weapon, glared in the face of the other, but he did not attempt to draw the pistol, for, despite the quiet way in which Talbot spoke—so different from his own blustering manner—he had not the slightest doubt that his antagonist would not hesitate to shoot him down in his tracks if he "pulled" the pistol.

Notwithstanding his boast that he was a "big chief," the man he was "hunting" had succeeded in getting the "drop" on him in a way he despised.

He glared in sullen rage at Talbot for a moment, so disgusted at having the tables turned upon him—in being taken by surprise when he had calculated upon getting his adversary foul himself, that for a moment or so he was unable to speak.

At last he found his tongue though, and blurted out:

"You have played a mighty cunning trick onto me, but you don't dar' to give me a fair show!"

"What kind of a show do you want?" Talbot demanded. "Here you come into this place with your revolvers all cocked, ready for action and if you had run across me, as you anticipated, the chances are big that I wouldn't have had much show for my life."

"Tain't so," the big fellow growled. "I allers give every man a fair shake, and that is all I ask myself."

"Oh, yes, you are quite willing to do the square thing now when you find yourself in a tight place," Talbot retorted.

"But, I say, what are you hunting me for, anyway? What did I ever do to you?"

"You killed my old pard, Don Maxwell," the desperado replied.

"He was no pard of yours, Leadville Mat!" Frisco Nell exclaimed. "And you know it too. Why, I don't believe you ever spoke a dozen words to him in your life."

"Mighty little you know about it!" the ruffian exclaimed. "Thar were reasons why we didn't hitch much together in public, but we were old pards all the same, and I swore to revenge his death."

"Well, you will not do it this time; that is certain," Talbot remarked. "And since you have openly proclaimed that there is war to the knife between us, I suppose I might as well plug you now and settle the difficulty."

"Hol' on—give the man someshaw!" exclaimed one of the men who had followed Leadville Mat into the saloon, a rather under-sized, ugly-looking customer who rejoiced in the name of Bow-legged Billy, and was reputed to be as tough a ruffian as No Man's Camp could boast.

And as Bow-legged Billy spoke both he and his companion—another desperado known as Red Jack, from the fact that his hair and beard were of a fiery hue—made a motion as though to draw their weapons.

Frisco Nell had been on the lookout for just such a movement, and had her revolver ready, so the moment the desperadoes evinced an inclination to come to the rescue of their companion, she threatened them with her weapon.

"Don't try any game of that kind!" she warned, "or else I will have to take a hand in the picnic."

Both the barkeeper and the bouncer, too, perceiving that there was a prospect of a general fight had begun to finger their weapons, and the desperadoes were quick to understand that the chances of war were decidedly against them, so they did not attempt to draw their revolvers.

They were ugly customers enough, and quick to fight, but they did not relish going into a contest where it appeared probable that they would be killed before they could get a chance to fire a shot.

"Hold on, boys!" Leadville Mat exclaimed. "Thar ain't ary bit of use of your sailing in when we don't stand no show for our money."

"You are just spoiling for a fight with me?" Talbot inquired, abruptly.

"I reckon I am."

"And you are a big chief any way I choose to take you?"

"You kin bet all the ducats you kin raise on that and you will win every time!" Leadville Mat cried, proudly.

"Well, I claim to be something of a chief, too, but for all that I am not anxious to have your blood on my hands, although I fancy that the camp would not miss you much if you were wiped out. But if you choose to put away your weapons and have a go with your fists, I will give you the worst thrashing that ever a man got in this camp."

The ruffian gladly accepted the offer, for as he

thought he was much the bigger man, he was certain of victory.

It did not take the antagonists long to prepare for the fight, and then at it they went, hammer and tongs, but before the battle had lasted a minute the desperado awoke to the conclusion that he had made a dreadful mistake.

It was the old story, science and strength against nothing but strength, and big as he was Leadville Mat was no match in any way for Dick Talbot.

Inside of five minutes the fellow was hammered to a stand-still, as badly a whipped man as the mining-camp had ever seen.

Like beaten curs he and his pards slunk from the saloon, and by nightfall the town woke to the knowledge that Dick Talbot was as good a man as the camp could boast.

CHAPTER XV. IN COUNCIL.

THE city marshal occupied a shanty next door to the calaboose.

The one room of the building was divided by a partition about seven feet high.

The space in front of the partition Black Mac used as an office. In the rear was his sleeping-room.

Black Mac sat with his feet elevated upon his desk, a cigar between his teeth, deep in meditation.

His reverie was interrupted by the abrupt entrance of Mayor White, who appeared to be considerably excited.

"Well, the deuce is to pay!" cried the mayor, as he flung himself into a chair.

"What is the matter?" asked the marshal.

"You know that Leadville Mat went in to clean out this strange sport who calls himself Dick Talbot?"

"Yes, I knew he was going to try his luck, and as Leadville is a tough customer I reckoned he would stand some show to get away with his man."

"Oh, yes, he got away with him!" exclaimed White, in an extremely sarcastic way.

"Leadville is a first-class man—the boss bruiser of this camp, according to his say-so—the kind of cuss that lays out so many men that he has to have a private graveyard; but when he came to tackle this Dick Talbot, inside of two minutes he made the discovery that he wasn't half as big a chief as he had thought he was."

"Talbot whipped him, then?" said the marshal, a dark scowl betraying how unwelcome was the unexpected intelligence.

"Oh, yes, in the worst kind of way! Played with him, in fact."

And then the mayor related the particulars of the encounter as he had received it from one of the witnesses to the fight.

There's an old saying that a good story never loses anything in the telling, and in this case the account of how easily and completely the stranger sport had whipped the bully of the camp was considerably magnified.

"I felt satisfied how the thing would turn out when I heard that Leadville was blowing round town that he was going to make it hot for this Talbot," added the mayor, with a wise look.

"I reckon I am a pretty good man myself," he continued. "I have been in some few fights and always managed to hold my own pretty well, but inside of five minutes arter I struck this Talbot I came to the conclusion I had run up ag'in' a cyclone."

"If Leadville had taken my advice, he would not have attempted to fight this fellow with his fists," the marshal observed.

"Well, according to the account he was not smart enough to get the drop on him with his pistol, and he either had to go for him with his fists or not at all."

The marshal was silent for a moment, busy in thought, then he shook his head and remarked:

"Gideon, old man, I am afraid we are going to have a deal of trouble in getting this fellow out of the camp."

"That is my idee, exactly."

"But it has got to be worked somehow, I think, for the fellow knows we have made a dead set at him, and if he stays in the town he will be mighty apt to try and square the account with us."

"Oh, yes, although if we let him alone here—after mebbe he will be satisfied to let the past alone," Mayor White suggested.

The lip of the marshal curled in contempt.

"Oho, you are weakening, are you?"

The mayor bristled up.

"Come, now, I don't think you ought to say that!" he exclaimed.

"There isn't any weakening about it as far as I can see. I have only been thinking the matter over; that's all. I have come to the conclusion that we made a bad break when we pitched into this sport. As far as I can see the man is quiet enough if he is let alone, and if we don't trouble him I do not believe he will trouble us."

"Well, I don't agree with you there!" the marshal exclaimed, a trace of impatience in his voice. "So far, thanks to the good men that we

have to back our game, we have run this camp without any trouble, and managed to make considerable money out of it, but if any of the citizens took it into their heads to call us to an account and make us show what we have done with the money we have collected, undoubtedly we would be put into a hole."

"Oh, yes, no doubt about that!"

"Of course there isn't. Now, then, to my thinking, this Talbot is just the kind of man to do a thing of that kind, and if a bold and resolute fellow of his stamp started such a movement there would be plenty to back him."

"Yes, yes, thar's a good many in the camp whose toes we have trodden on, and they would be glad of a chance to git squar' with us, but they lack the courage to come out and make an open fight."

"Very true, and the principal thing they lack is a leader. There is enough of them to give us a good fight if they had a man to head them."

"Granting that all you say is true, I don't see how we are going to run the cuss out of the camp," the mayor remarked, with a dubious shake of the head.

"It will be a difficult matter—there isn't any doubt about that, for this Talbot is no common man, but the job has got to be done."

"Well, if your ideas are correct in regard to there being a chance of his making trouble for us, I s'pose we will have to h'ist him out, but I reckon, from what I have seen of the cuss, that it will be the toughest job we ever tackled."

"Very likely, but we must put it through all the same," the marshal replied with an air of firm determination.

"You have tried your luck—"

"And made the durnest kind of a failure!" the mayor exclaimed.

"Yes, I think that is about the size of it," Black Mac observed.

"And now I s'pose you are going to see what kind of a fist you kin make."

"That is my leetle game."

"Well, you are going to start in with one big advantage," Mayor White remarked, after thinking the matter over for a moment.

"You know something about the cuss and kin calculate how to go for him; you ain't buying no cat in a bag like I was. This hyer Talbot is mighty deceptive-looking, for he don't appear like a man who would be able to make the biggest kind of a fight. I reckon I am a good judge, but I never made a bigger mistake in my life than when I tackled this hyer sport, for I stood no more chance to get away with him than a hawk would to wallop an eagle."

"Oh, he's a good man, there's no mistake about that," the marshal assented. "And the man who tackles him with the idea that it is going to be an easy job to cut his comb will wish he hadn't tried it on before he has been at it long."

"Talbot is the kind of man that it is not safe to take any chances with, and when I make up my mind to go for him I shall be careful to start in with all the advantages on my side—you bet!"

"That is the only way to do. This feller is a sport from 'way-back; the handiest man with his fists who ever struck this town, and I would be willing to bet a heap of ducats, too—though I don't know anything about it—that when it comes to we'pons he kin hold his own, and maybe a leetle more, too."

"I should not be surprised," the marshal remarked. "A sport of this kind is generally able to take care of himself, and, as a rule, such fellows are more expert with weapons than with their fists."

"Yes, that is so."

"The sport is a good man, of course, there is no doubt about that, but I reckon there are other good men in the camp, too, and, if I am any judge, some of the boys will be anxious to see if they can't make this hyer Talbot take water."

The mayor shook his head in a dubious manner.

"Well, I don't know 'bout that," he observed. "Since this sport laid out Leadville Mat so easily, the fighting-men are a leetle scared to tackle him."

"Leadville was one of the big chiefs of the town, you know, and thar isn't many of the boys who keer to run afoul of him."

"Very true; but really, when you come to look into the matter, isn't Leadville a greatly overrrted man?" Black Mac asked, shrewdly.

"Well, he's a man who is always blowing his own horn at a great rate, and, I reckon, has done a good deal more fighting with his mouth than in any other way since he struck No Man's Camp."

"That is the truth and no mistake, and this little skirmish of his with Talbot satisfies me that he is not half so dangerous a man as he has tried to make people believe."

"I reckon you have hit it, but this sport is a hummer, and I think he would have got away with Leadville if our galoot had been twice as good a man as he is. I s'pose you are right 'bout running Talbot out of the town, but I don't envy you the job."

And with this assurance the mayor departed, leaving the marshal to plot and plan, but hardly had he settled down to good, steady work in this line when he was interrupted by a visitor whom he little expected.

CHAPTER XVI.

FRISCO NELL SPEAKS PLAINLY.

It was Frisco Nell, and from the look upon her face, the marshal immediately jumped to the conclusion that she came upon important business.

Black Mac had a presentiment that there was trouble ahead, but he did not allow the thought to become apparent by receiving his visitor coolly.

On the contrary, he jumped to his feet and greeted the girl in the warmest manner.

"Well, really this is an unexpected pleasure!" he exclaimed, hastening to place a chair for Frisco Nell's accommodation.

"You are about the last person in the world whom I expected to see, but you are heartily welcome, all the same. It is not often that I enjoy the pleasure of a lady's visit."

"Perhaps before our interview is ended you may come to the conclusion that my call may not be so pleasant as you at present anticipate."

"Oh, I am not in the least afraid of that!" the marshal answered.

"Well, you will soon see," the lady responded, as she seated herself in the chair which the marshal proffered.

Then she took a good look around the room.

"I suppose I can speak freely without danger of being overheard?"

"Oh, yes, there isn't any one in the building but us two."

"I am going to talk business, and I don't want the whole town to know what is going on."

"Of course not."

"Particularly as we have kept our secret so well that no one suspects that we are partners."

"That is true; not a soul in the camp has any idea that I have an interest in the Golden Hairpin."

"It has been a good speculation for both of us," the girl observed, in a thoughtful way.

"Yes, neither of us has any right to complain."

"I little thought when you happened to make my acquaintance in Tombstone and proposed the matter that it would turn out so well."

"Oh, I felt certain from the beginning that there was a deal of money in the speculation. I have been located in this camp right from the start, you know, and saw that the town had come to stay. There wasn't a first-class saloon in the place, and I made up mind a good one would make big money, but being the marshal of the town I did not want to start a place myself, for by so doing I would get all the rest of the saloon-keepers down on me. There was a good deal of talk that Mayor White and myself had a fat thing of it, and I did not want to give the croakers a chance to say I was milking the whole town. That was the reason why I went over to Tombstone on purpose to get a party to run the place, so I could keep in the background."

"You have certainly succeeded in doing that."

"Yes, and the scheme has paid a deuced sight better than I anticipated. I can thank you for that," the marshal admitted.

"I presume the novelty of a woman running such a place has attracted custom."

"Oh, yes, the place has done a hundred per cent. better than it would otherwise, and if the business holds up—and I don't see why it should not—by the close of the year each of us will make a small fortune."

"I am sorry to be obliged to spoil that pleasant prospect," Frisco Nell observed dryly.

"How's that?" exclaimed the marshal, annoyed.

"My business here is to tell you that this partnership which at present exists between us must come to an end," the girl remarked in the most decided manner.

"Well, I am completely astonished!" Black Mac observed. "I had no idea that you were dissatisfied."

"MacGregor, do you take me for an idiot?" the girl demanded, her great, black eyes flashing angrily.

"Oh, no, certainly not."

"Do you suppose that the gossip which is current in this camp does not come to my ears?"

"I presume you hear what is going on, of course," and as he made the reply Black Mac endeavored to assume an innocent air, conscious that the keen eyes of Frisco Nell were watching him intently.

"And no doubt the gossip to which I refer has reached your ears also."

"I don't think I get your meaning exactly," the marshal responded; uneasy, although he did his best not to show it.

"I speak of the whispers which have been floating around the camp that I had something to do with the death of Donald Maxwell."

A look of amazement appeared on the features of Black Mac.

"Well, I am astonished!" he exclaimed. "I give you my word I never heard any such rumor, for if I had I would certainly have tried to make it warm for the man who dared to even hint at such a thing."

"You would, eh?" and there was a deal of doubt in Frisco Nell's tone.

"Oh, yes, I most surely would have told the fellow that he was a liar to his teeth!"

"Then you do not believe that I had anything to do with that most foul and dastardly murder?"

"Certainly not!" the marshal responded in the most emphatic manner.

"Why, of all the inhabitants of this camp, you would be the last one I should suspect."

"That is a strong statement," Frisco Nell remarked, thoughtfully.

"If I could make it stronger I certainly would," the marshal exclaimed.

"It is strange, for, to be honest with you, I had come to the conclusion that you were the man who had started this report."

"The supposition is absurd! I know that you hadn't anything to do with the murder, and even if I thought you had I would be much more anxious to conceal my suspicions than to make them public."

"Well, under the circumstances that is the line of action I should suppose you would be likely to take, and you can readily imagine, I suppose, how surprised and indignant I was when it came to my knowledge that you were doing your best to make the people of this camp believe that I either killed Donald Maxwell with my own hand or hired some ruffian to do the deed."

"But this is really absurd, you know!" the marshal exclaimed. "You ought not to allow any one to impose on your credulity with such an outrageous falsehood. I would be the last man in the town to circulate such a report. I will admit that I heard insinuations that you might know something about the murder. The bold stand that you took on behalf of the strange sport and your assertion that you knew he was innocent led some of the miners to believe that the reason why you interfered was because you knew who *did* commit the murder—possibly had a hand in the crime yourself. Some of these wise men have noticed that for a week or so you and Maxwell have not been on as good terms as usual; they reasoned that he had grown cold toward you and you had sought revenge by striking at his life. I knew that this wasn't so, for I was well aware that the coldness was more on your side than on his."

"Well, all I have to say is that while sitting by a window in my saloon I heard a conversation between two miners who had met and halted just outside, and in conversing about the murder, one man distinctly told the other that you—the marshal—felt sure I knew more about the murder than anybody else in the town; you were weaving a web around me from which it would be impossible for me to escape, and that the moment you got me dead to rights you would clap the handcuffs upon me."

"Bah, mere idle talk!" Black Mac exclaimed, contemptuously.

"I am not without friends in this camp," the girl continued, "and some of them good ones, too, who are willing to do all in their power for me, and when the knowledge of this malicious action on your part came to my ears I got some of them to quietly look into the matter, and their report to me was that it seemed as though you and your pards were responsible for the rumor."

"It is a lie!" cried the marshal, angrily.

"Look at it in the light of common sense! Why should I want to circulate such a report? There isn't any reason for it. Then, too, I am firm in the belief that we had the murderer when we arrested this Talbot, but as the evidence was not strong enough we had to let him go. You had no reason to wish harm to Maxwell, for I know well enough that it was he who was after you, not you after him."

"Well, that is what bothered me when I got an idea of what was going on," the girl remarked, slowly. "Why should you wish to direct suspicion against me?"

"Of course! The idea is ridiculous!"

"Yes, unless you are playing the deepest kind of a game," Frisco Nell responded, with her eyes fixed intently upon the face of the marshal as though anxious to behold the effect of every word.

"Now, suppose that you knew all about this murder—suppose you knew who committed the crime, and for certain reasons of your own, desired to screen the doer of the deed—"

"Oh, yes, but that is utterly out of the question, you know," Black Mac interrupted, evidently not at all pleased with the turn the conversation was taking.

"Please to remember that I am only supposing a case," Frisco Nell responded, quietly, but with an ugly look in her dark eyes.

"If matters were in that shape—if you wanted to shield the actual murderer, how better could you do it than by directing suspicion against a woman like myself, who does not bear the best of names?"

"But why should I want to shield the assassin?"

sin?" demanded the marshal with well-assumed indignation.

"Because you had more to gain by Donald Maxwell's death than anybody else in No Man's Camp. You are anxious to marry Diantha Maxwell, but while Donald lived you knew he would be against you; but now he is dead the girl is left friendless and alone, and is almost certain to become yours. You had far greater reason to murder Maxwell than I, Frisco Nell!"

CHAPTER XVII.

A BARGAIN.

For a few moments silence reigned, broken only by the heavy breathing of the pair.

The face of the marshal was dark with anger, and now it could easily be perceived how fitly the name of Black Mac applied to him, but Frisco Nell faced the angry man undauntedly.

She had not come to beard the tiger in his den without counting the consequences.

The marshal was the first to speak.

"If a man had dared to say to me what you have just said it would either be his life or mine!" he exclaimed.

"Oh, I have no doubt about that," she replied. "No one in this camp has ever doubted your courage, I believe, and to tell you the plain, unvarnished truth, I was not sure that you would not be enraged enough to attack me."

"Oh, no, I make no war on women!" he responded, contemptuously.

"Well, acting the part that I am; really unsexing myself, I don't know that I am entitled to the consideration usually paid to women."

"You are perfectly safe as far as I am concerned, and can say what you like," the marshal remarked, curbing his rage with a great effort.

"Well, I am glad of course that there isn't going to be any trouble, but I will not attempt to conceal from you that I came prepared for war. During the ten years that I have been obliged to fight the world and look out for myself I have not neglected to cultivate an acquaintance with all kinds of weapons, and I am not boasting when I say that I can handle either a knife, pistol or rifle far better than the average man who dwells on the frontier."

"So you were prepared to defend yourself in case your plain speaking made me so angry as to induce me to forget you were a woman and to treat you as I would treat a man who dared to beard me to my teeth?"

"Yes, I will admit that I came prepared for war, for I was determined to tell you what I thought about the matter. I wanted to show you that you have far more reason to wish for Donald Maxwell's death than I, and above all, give you to understand that I knew of these secret attacks you were making upon me."

"I see you are firmly convinced that I am at the bottom of this malicious report," Black Mac remarked, in a thoughtful way, just as if he was meditating how he could convince the girl that her suspicions were not true.

"Oh, yes, I don't think there is much doubt about it, for the proofs to my mind appear to be convincing," Frisco Nell replied, decidedly.

"I have seen enough of women to know that when the average one gets an idea into her head it is pretty hard work to get it out, even if she cannot give a good reason for its being there, so I will not attempt to argue the case with you," the marshal observed.

"All I will say is, you have wronged me, your surmise is not true, and you ought to be satisfied to take my word in regard to the matter in preference to allowing yourself to be swayed by the idle talk of the camp bums."

"Well, I hope your statement is true, of course, but you must admit if you were guilty you would deny it just as strongly as though you were innocent."

"Oh, yes, that goes without saying."

"That is the way I feel about the matter. You may be innocent—I am sure I hope you are—but while I have this suspicion in my mind I do not feel like having any business dealings with you, and so I say this partnership between us must come to an end."

"Do you propose to withdraw from the Golden Hairpin?"

"Yes; or else buy you out."

"You know I found all the money, and yet have allowed you half the profits ever since the place opened."

"You put your money against my services, and, really, I think you have had decidedly the best of the bargain."

"Well, I suppose I haven't any reason to complain. May I ask what you intend to do if you withdraw from the saloon?"

"Certainly; there is no reason why I should keep my plans a secret. I intend to open another place."

"Which you will call the Golden Hairpin?"

"Yes; for that was my idea, and I claim the right to use the name, and if you are disposed to be fair and honest about the matter you will change the name of the saloon after I leave it."

The marshal meditated over the matter for a few moments, and then he said:

"Under the circumstances I reckon I had better sell out to you. You are identified with the

saloon, and I don't think it would be apt to do much business after you left it, particularly if you started an opposition place."

"Yes; I think it would be better for you to allow me to retain the saloon."

"Let me see," observed the marshal, taking out his pencil and figuring on one of the sheets of paper which lay on the table.

"The saloon cost a thousand dollars to fit up, in the first place; then there's about five hundred dollars' worth of liquor on hand."

"Not quite so much as that," Frisco Nell remarked.

"Well, you ought to be willing to allow me a little bonus."

"All right; call it five hundred, then."

"Fifteen hundred dollars will cover the whole thing. You give me fifteen hundred and the Golden Hairpin is yours."

"Make out a bill of sale and here's your cash," said Frisco Nell, in a business-like way, producing the money and placing it upon the table.

Black Mac wrote out the document, Frisco Nell counted the money, then pushed it over to the marshal, taking from him the bill of sale, which she carefully perused, folded and placed in her pocket-book.

"Well, that business is settled," Black Mac remarked. "I am sorry to break off the pleasant relations which have existed between us, and I hope we part as friends."

Frisco Nell rose to her feet.

"There is no reason why we should be enemies," she replied. "And if you don't go out of your way to attack me, most certainly I shall not trouble my head about you."

"Upon you—not upon me—depends whether in the future we will be friends or foes."

And then the girl departed.

The marshal's brow clouded over and he bent his gaze upon the floor in gloomy meditation as the door closed after Frisco Nell.

For fully five minutes he remained silent, deep in thought, and then he raised his head, and staring at the wall before him exclaimed:

"That woman threatens to be dangerous! It was a mistake to involve her in the matter at all, but if it had not been for the accident of the fools talking about the affair right outside of her place her suspicions would not have been excited."

"In the future I must go slow as far as she is concerned. Luckily she hasn't any strong friends to aid her or else I might be put into an extremely dangerous position."

"I reckon it will be better for me to let her alone. She is just the kind of woman who would not hesitate to put a bullet into a man if she conceived she had been wronged, and to have my thread of life cut in twain by a woman's hand is not the fate for me."

"So, Miss Frisco Nell, in the future I will try to let you alone."

"Now, then, I must see my friend, the Express agent, about that little matter."

The Express office was directly across the street from the marshal's place, and so it only took Black Mac a minute to reach it.

Alex Broadbent, the Express agent, was a middle-aged man with a jovial face and a pleasant manner.

He bore the reputation of being about the best-natured man in No Man's Camp, and therefore was universally popular.

Broadbent was a portly man of large build, and sported a long, bushy brown beard, the handsomest one in the town.

The Express agent was deep in the columns of a newspaper when the marshal entered, and was also amusing himself by pulling away at a short pipe, almost black from long service.

"How are you, Alex?" said Black Mac, as he unceremoniously helped himself to a chair. "I want a little information out of you."

"Well, now, you have come to the right shop to get it, and no mistake," responded the Express agent in his good-natured way.

"If you don't see what you want, ask for it! A large and valuable stock of information constantly on hand—on tap, as might be said, to be dispensed free gratis, for nothing!"

"There was a pilgrim called on me this morning who had got down to the bed-rock, but had an Express receipt showing that he had a hundred dollars in the Express company's hands deposited at Beaver Flat. Now, he wanted to sell that receipt to me—at a discount, of course. Can I get it cashed here?"

"Not much!"

"At Beaver Flat, then?"

"You couldn't; the agent might oblige the man himself, charging for the trouble; I have done such a thing, but an Express receipt is not like a check, which by indorsing can be passed from hand to hand."

"Yes, I see; well, I wasn't posted, so I thought I would inquire. Suppose this cuss should lose his receipt?"

"Well, he would have to depend upon the honesty of the agent, then, and as the agent, having sent the money to headquarters, would have no object in lying about the matter, for he could not make anything, he would undoubtedly give him a new receipt."

"I suppose you fellows carry all those things

in your head so as to be able to tell just about how much every man in the camp sends off."

"Not much we don't!" Broadbent answered, decidedly. "That is, I don't, and I reckon the rest haven't any better head than I have. I don't bother my brains with such things, and if any man in the camp was anxious to know how much he had deposited with the Express company, I should be obliged to go through my books to tell him."

"Suppose a man should lose his receipts, and the books of the agent should happen to be destroyed, what show would he have to get his money from the Express company?"

The agent closed one eye, winked with the other in a mysterious manner, and then he answered, slowly:

"Well, it ain't for me to say much to the disparagement of the company from whom I get my bread and butter, but if any galoot should come to me and want me to take a hand in any such game as to try and git money from an Express company without being able to produce any proofs for to show that the ducats had been in, I should ask to be excused. I would not risk a cent on a dollar in any such wild speculation."

"I s'pose this galoot has been trying to rope you in with this cock-and-bull story?"

"Yes, he was kinder hinting round that way."

"He's a fraud! No agent is likely to lose his books, unless by a fire, or some accident of the kind, and if the books were destroyed and the man couldn't pony up the receipts, the big guns of the Express company are only men, and they would be apt to hold on to the plunder—charge it to profit and loss, you know," and again the Express agent indulged in one of his mysterious winks.

"Yes, yes, of course; then no one but the owner can use the receipt?"

"That's all."

"S'pose the man dies?"

"Then his legal heirs come in."

"I see; and about the only way I can make a stake out of this fellow is to get him to make a will in my favor and then kill him," remarked the marshal, jocosely.

"That is about the only chance you have, and then, unless the man has a big boodle, it would not pay you for your trouble."

"I guess I will not kill him this heat, then," the marshal remarked, as he rose to depart.

"No, I reckon I wouldn't, although we have not had a funeral for some time, and it would kinder 'liven up the town.'"

The marshal smiled at the joke, and then retraced his steps to his own quarters.

"Now I am in possession of all the facts, I shall know exactly how to go to work," he muttered, as he crossed the street.

"So far I have played a pretty good game, and the only mistake I made was in getting Frisco Nell down on me; but I will look out about her in future."

"The next move is to rid the camp of this Talbot, for I have a presentiment he will prove to be dangerous if he remains."

"Oh, for some good tool to use against him, so as to keep in the background myself!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE TIGER OF TUCSON.

THERE'S an old saying, "Speak of the devil and he appears," and in this case the vehement wish of the marshal of No Man's Camp for some champion, able and willing to fight Dick Talbot, had hardly passed his lips, when up the street, on the back of a wiry mustang, came a man, who, of all the desperadoes known to Black Mac, would have been selected by him for the doing of such a deed as he had in view.

The fellow was a stranger to No Man's Camp, although an old acquaintance of the marshal.

He was a little above the medium size, well-made and muscular, habited in the frontier garb of buckskin, his suit very much the worse for wear, showing traces of time and toil.

His face was strongly marked, rather raw-boned; the man, though, would be termed good-looking, but for his air of dissipation.

The most noticeable thing about the newcomer was his hair, which was bright red in color and worn long in ringlets, curling down upon his shoulders after the fashion made notorious by Buffalo Bill and his brother scouts.

The stranger was well-armed, a Winchester rifle being slung across his back, while the stout leather belt which girded his waist supported a pair of revolvers and a ten-inch bowie-knife.

He was within twenty feet of the marshal when the latter caught sight of him, and the recognition was mutual.

"Hello, hello, Black Mac, as I am a living man!" exclaimed the new-comer.

"Well, Johnny Sands, you are about the last man I expected to see!" responded the marshal.

"Yes; hyer I am, alive and kicking."

"And that is what astonishes me," Black Mac rejoined. "According to my calculation you ought to be shaking a leg down below by this time."

"Oh, no; I've got a deal of work to do on earth yet; besides, I reckon the old devil down-

stairs will not be in a hurry to welcome such a lively boy as the red-hot Tiger of Tucson."

"You still stick to the old name, I see."

"Oh, yes; that is good enough for me until I strike a better one, which ain't likely."

"Well, hop off your war-horse and come into my shanty and have a drink. I am town marshal here, and I s'pose I ought to do the honors."

"Oho! you are the marshal, hey?" exclaimed the stranger, as he dismounted from his steed and followed MacGregor into his office, first taking the precaution to fasten the lariat of the mustang to a convenient post.

"Yes, I'm the marshal," Black Mac responded, as he placed a chair for his visitor and then set out a bottle of whisky and a couple of glasses.

The other took a chair and then helped himself to a good, big drink of the ardent fluid.

"That is good stuff!" he exclaimed, smacking his lips.

"Well, do you know, Mac, I am really sorry to discover that you are the marshal of this camp!" he continued.

"How so?"

"Well, you know, this is my first visit to this camp and I was jest wondering how I could properly introduce myself to the boys—how I could make 'em comprehend, you know, that a human cyclone had struck the town, and I had about made up my mind that the best game I could play would be to play the marshal of the camp."

"The marshal is generally a rustler, you see, and if I laid the marshal out right in the beginning, the rest of the town would kinder git an idee that I amounted to something."

"Yes, yes, a very good scheme."

"Well, I reckoned it was, and from what I had heard of this camp I thought it would be jest the rifle to catch the boys."

"It would be apt to impress them with the idea that you were a tough customer. But I say, how comes it that you have headed in this direction?"

"Now, to tell you the honest truth, it was about the only point I could head for, unless I jumped over the border into Greaser Land, and I hate the yaller-bellies worse than a lot of snakes."

"You have been getting in trouble all 'round, eh?"

"Yes, the law has been a-reaching for me in a way I despise, and only in some town like this whar I would be safe from the sheriff and his posse could I find shelter."

"You are all right here. This is No Man's Land, and no sheriff dares to show his nose within our borders, even though he had an army at his back."

"That is what I understood, and that is why I made tracks for this district. The sheriff from Tombstone with five men were hot after me, but I stood the gang off and killed three of them. Mebbe, that will be a kind of an introduction to the town, that is, if the boys are willing to swallow the yarn and not take it to be a ghost story."

"I reckon if any man doubts your ability to hold your own you will speedily be able to convince him that you are a warrior," the marshal observed.

"Yes, and although I say it, who ought not to, I am as wild and woolly a critter as can be scared up west of the Big Muddy; I'm the Tiger of Tucson, for a fact, and any camp which once makes the acquaintance of Johnny Sands will never be likely to forget it."

"This camp is just the place for you, and if you are as great a sport as you used to be, I reckon you will be able to make big money here."

"Well, I reckon I kin flip the pasteboards as keen as ever, but the hull trouble with me is that my temper gits the best of me. If I skin a man in a scientific manner and he begins to kick arter the job is done, the chances are 'bout a hundred to one that I will go for him, and as when I go for meat I generally get it, arter I have wiped out three or four galoots the town begins to git a prejudice ag'in' me, so I have to skip. If it wasn't for that I would make big money almost everywhar."

"This is just the spot for you. If two gents quarrel here and pull weapons, as long as the fight is fair and above-board, we don't blame the man who wins, even if he does fix his opponent for planting."

"Why, this hyer camp is a reg'lar paradise!" the Tiger of Tucson exclaimed, exultingly.

"Look out, though, to have the fight a square one," the marshal warned.

"Of course. I am not the kind of man to want to take advantage. I never met the man yet I was afeard to meet in a fair, square fight."

"There's a man in this camp though that will be apt to trouble you."

"Aha!" cried the sport, eagerly. "he's jest the galoot I am looking for. I am jest hungry for a skirmish."

"He is a stranger here and calls himself Dick Talbot; he's a gambler—one of those cool sharps who play their cards so well that they manage to come out ahead in nearly every deal."

"Let me git into a game with him, and you kin bet yer bottom dollar that he will not come

out ahead, for I kin flip the pasteboards with ary man that ever traveled as a sport in the West. All that bothers me is that I am about clean broke jist now."

"I'll take a share with you," the marshal observed, producing his money.

"Here's a hundred to commence on. There's a poker game nightly at the Golden Hairpin saloon, and it is likely that this Talbot will take a hand in it to-night, so you will have a chance to go in and climb him."

"I'll be thar! You kin bet all yer ducats on it. Say!" he cried, abruptly, as a sudden idea occurred to him.

"You don't like this Talbot much, I reckon."

"No, not much."

"What will it be worth if I down him?"

"A hundred, anyway."

"It is a go! You kin make all the preparations for his funeral to-morrow, and I will see that the body is ready!" the bravo exclaimed, arrogantly, rising to his feet as he spoke.

"But you haven't seen the man yet to take his measure," the marshal objected.

"What do I care for his measure! If he was the biggest giant that ever struck the West I will be good for him. I know my measure, and that's enuff."

"Don't neglect to arrange for planting him to-morrow, and on the tombstone you kin put, 'He met the Tiger of Tucson and died.' Ta, ta." And then he swaggered out.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE TIGER'S QUEST.

AFTER leaving the marshal's office the Tiger of Tucson mounted his mustang and rode to the hotel, which was a couple of hundred yards down the street.

"A mighty good thing that I struck this rifle," he cogitated, as he went on his way; he had merely gathered the reins up in his hand and was allowing the animal to proceed according to his own notion, and as the beast was tired, having come a long distance, he was glad of an opportunity to walk.

"But I say, Johnny Sands, old boy, what in thunder is the use of your waiting until night to attend to this leetle job?" he continued.

"Why not go for the galoot as soon as you kin hunt him up and while you have the daylight so as to be able to see what you are about?"

"I reckon that is the best way to fix the job. Never put off until to-morrow the game you kin play to-day; that is old business from the word go!"

Acting upon this idea the desperado, after he arrived at the hotel and arranged for a room, proceeded to inquire of the landlord in regard to Talbot.

"I am a stranger hyer," he began, "but I have heerd that you have some right smart good men in this hyer camp."

"Oh, yes, I reckon the boys kin hold their own," the host replied.

"I have heerd that thar is a galoot hyer named Talbot—Dick Talbot—who is a big chief, and no mistake!"

"Well, he is a stranger, and I reckon thar ain't anybody in the camp that knows much about him. So far he has panned out well, and the most of the boys seem to think that he is good pay-dirt all the way through."

"Say, I've an awful curiosity to see this hyer Talbot," the desperado remarked. "Whar does he generally hang out during the daytime?"

"Nowhar in particular as I knows on," the landlord replied. "He stops with me hyer and at night he is allers around town somewhar: I s'pose you would be more apt to run across him at the Golden Hairpin ranch than at any other shebang in the town."

"Not much show to get a squint at him now, eh?"

"Not much; thar ain't anything going on in the daytime, and like the most of the sports this hyer Talbot has taken to prospecting," the landlord explained.

"Some of the biggest strikes in this district have been made by sports putting in their spare time wandering 'round the country, instead of loafing 'bout the camp, as the most of them do."

"I see, I see," the desperado remarked, "it ain't a bad idee. This hyer Talbot is a right smart chap with the pasteboards, I heer."

"Well, I reckon he kin hold his own from what I have seen of him."

"Considerable of a fighter, too, I believe," the Tiger of Tucson observed, carelessly, just as if he had no real interest in the matter, but was only talking for the purpose of passing away time.

The landlord was a shrewd old man of the world, though, and had thoroughly "taken the measure" of the stranger, as was his custom when any of his guests seemed to be men out of the common run.

There was that about Johnny Sands which to the experienced eyes of the old hotel-keeper betrayed that he was a man used to brawls and battles; just the kind of fellow to come into a strange camp with the idea of picking a quarrel with the—supposed to be—best man in the place.

The sort of man who would take up a position in the center of the town, proclaim that he was

a chief, then dare one and all to come on and dispute his right to the title.

He had heard that Dick Talbot was a good man and so was eager to test his prowess.

Having come to this conclusion the wily old hotel-keeper determined to afford the stranger no satisfaction.

"Well, I dunno 'bout that," the host observed, reflectively. "The fact is, he hasn't been in the camp long enough yet for us to r'ally take his measure."

"Mebbe he is a good man—I ain't a saying that he ain't, you know, and mebbe thar's a heap sight better men in the camp than what he is. We have got some good, likely men in the town, stranger, you kin bet all yer ducats onto it! Thar's Leadville Mat, Bow-legged Billy, Red Jack, Old Man Finnegan, the Golden Hairpin bouncer, and a sight more whose names I can't call to mind jist now. You see we have got the liveliest kind of a town hyer—we don't bar out no camp for a thousand miles!"

The desperado was deceived by the careless way in which the landlord spoke of the man for whose scalp he hungered.

As the boss of the principal hotel in the camp the landlord was of course well-posted, and from his speech it was plain he did not consider Talbot to be one of the great guns of the camp, so Sands immediately came to the conclusion the marshal had overestimated the man, and that in place of a difficult job the task before him would be a comparatively easy one. Therefore he resolved not to bother his head about the matter until night came on, and as he was tired after his long journey, he went up to his room and laid himself down for a nap.

The landlord saw that he had "fooled" the stranger, and after the Tiger departed, indulged in a hearty laugh.

"Well, now, I reckon the cuss did not get much information 'bout Mister Dick Talbot out of me!" he exclaimed.

"And what he did get will not be apt to do him much good," he continued, "for instead of letting on that Talbot is a rustler from way-back, I have kinder allowed he did not amount to much, but I reckon that if this strange rooster goes in for to sample him he will be one of the most astonished galoots that ever struck this camp."

Leaving the landlord to enjoy the joke which he had played upon the stranger, we will turn our attention to some of the other characters of our tale.

And as the reader is probably interested in the beautiful girl, so suddenly bereft of her protector, we will proceed to relate the particulars of a strange incident which occurred to Diantha Maxwell on the afternoon of the day on which the Tiger of Tucson had made his appearance in No Man's Camp.

Diantha still continued to reside in the same cabin which she had occupied in common with her brother, although after the episode of the visit of the masked men, she thought seriously of changing her quarters to the hotel, but MacGregor, after thinking the matter over, counseled her to remain where she was so as not to abandon the mining property, for he reasoned that there was little danger of the disguised marauders paying her another visit, but as a preventive of such an occurrence, he engaged a watchman who stood guard every night.

The marshal told Diantha that he was greatly puzzled to understand how it was that her brother's affairs seemed to be in so bad a shape.

He said he had had an interview with Mayor White, and, as he had expected, the mayor informed him that only the earnest money had been paid on the Heather Bell property.

"Why, that leaves me almost penniless," Diantha exclaimed in dismay.

"Yes, the outlook is not brilliant," the marshal admitted.

"I do not understand it at all, for right from the beginning Donald always spoke as though he was making money rapidly."

"Well, the only explanation I can give," Black Mac responded, after apparently turning the matter over in his mind for a moment, "is that he was thinking and speaking of the future."

"Possibly, yet he did not seem to speak in that way, and he always appeared to have plenty of money."

"It is a great mystery," the marshal observed, with a wise shake of the head.

"Yes, and the more I think about it the more bewildered I become."

"There is not a doubt that this Heather Bell property will be very valuable in the future. I have been taking a look at it, and I can see that by expending a few thousand dollars the mine could be made to pay very handsomely."

"Alas! I have not the money to pay off the mortgage, let alone expending any cash for improvements!" Diantha exclaimed, with a disconsolate air.

"Yes, that is very true, but you must allow me to assist you, which I will gladly do. I do not know as I have quite ready cash enough to pull the thing through, but if I have not I can raise the funds without difficulty."

Naturally, at this generous offer, the grateful tears rose readily to the eyes of the girl, and in

broken accents she thanked him for his kindness.

"Oh, that is all right," he replied. "Since fate has seen fit to deprive you of your natural protector you must allow me to fill the place of a brother to you until you can bring yourself to consent to accept me for a husband—but there is no hurry about that, you know," he hastened to say, perceiving that the color was rising in the girl's face. "I am patient and content to wait."

"You are so kind to me," Diantha murmured. "I do not doubt that in time I will be able to yield to your wishes and become your wife."

"Well, I hope so, of course, but I do not want to worry you with my attentions. I would scorn to owe to your gratitude what I seek from your love," he responded; then, perceiving that the girl was embarrassed, he changed the subject of the conversation to business matters again, and soon after departed.

Being left alone the girl fell into a reverie from which she awoke with a sigh.

"Why is it that I cannot seem to bring myself to look upon this man in the light of my future husband?" she exclaimed.

"He is the most devoted of lovers, and yet somehow I cannot feel toward him as I would like to feel."

She brooded over the matter for some time, and then, in order to relieve her mind, she put on her hat and went forth for a walk.

Taking the northern trail she strolled on for fully a mile, getting well beyond all the outlying cabins.

She had walked on, busy in thought, taking little heed of her surroundings; but, happening to look around, she saw that she had come further than she intended, for she was in a strange, wild country, and just as she had made up her mind to turn and retrace her footsteps, three villainous-looking men, armed to the teeth, rose from amid a clump of bushes by the side of the trail.

CHAPTER XX.

LEADVILLE MAT'S DESIGN.

THE first impulse of Diantha was to scream in fright, for the men made their appearance so abruptly and unexpectedly that she lost her self-possession, and the fellows were wild and rude enough in their looks to cause a strong man to feel alarmed, let alone a timid and unprotected woman. But her fright was so great that for the moment she lost the use of her voice, and before she recovered it she had time to take a second look at the men, and discovered that they were all "grinning" at her in the most friendly manner, and then they made an awkward bow.

The heart of Diantha gave a great leap—the rough fellows did not intend to molest her after all.

"How do you, marm?" said the biggest one of the three, evidently the master-spirit of the trio. "I s'pose you ain't acquainted with me, although I was one of the biggest friends that yer brother had in the camp? My name is Leadville Mat."

And it was in truth the bully who had been handled so roughly by Dick Talbot.

"I—I think I have heard my brother speak of you," Diantha responded.

She hardly knew what to say, for although she told the truth when she said she had heard her brother speak of Leadville Mat, yet she remembered that his speech had been anything but complimentary to that person, for he had spoken of him as being one of the biggest loafers in the town, adding that it would be a good day for No Man's Camp when such rascals as Leadville Mat were either killed or driven out of the place.

"Oh, I bet you did!" Leadville Mat exclaimed. "Yer brother and me were ole side-pards, we were, jist as thick as thieves. I would be willing to go all my ducats that thar wasn't a man in the camp he thought more of than he did of me. Ain't that so, pards?"

And the pards all grinned and nodded assent.

"These gen'lemen, too, were all big friends of yer brother," Leadville Mat continued. "Mebbe you have heard him speak of them; this hyer galoot is named Red Jack, and he's a tearer from Tearville," and he pointed to the red-headed, red-bearded ruffian who stood on his right hand.

"And this hyer squint-eyed, bandy-legged cuss is Bow-legged Billy, one of the biggest chiefs of the camp."

Both of the ruffians ducked their heads and grinned, and Diantha gracefully acknowledged the salute, perceiving that the fellows expected as much.

"We ain't any on us got on our Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes, you understand," Leadville Mat continued. "But, of course, you have been long enuff in the camp to understand that honest workingmen like us—and at this point the other two could not repress the broadest kind of a grin, for it had been a long time since any one had applied such a title to them—"can't afford to dress up like sports who ain't got nothing better to do than to rob poor men out of their money by all sorts of tricks with cards, like this hyer sharp, Dick Talbot—the cuss, you know."

w'ot come pretty near stretching hemp for having killed yer brother, and if I had had my way, I tell you he would have been strung up in short order.

"As I was a-saying, we may look kinder rough, but we are white all the way through and just the men to tie to."

Then the ruffian paused, and Diantha, perceiving she was expected to reply, said:

"I am well aware that in the mining region it is not wise to be prejudiced against a man because he is poorly or roughly dressed."

"That's the p'int! that is w'ot I was gitting at!" Leadville Mat exclaimed.

"We are true-blue, we are, if we do look rough, and I tell you w'ot it is, Miss Maxwell, you ain't got no better friends in this hyer town than we three galoots, and we are going to prove it to you, too, by jest layin' out this hyer Mister Dick Talbot!"

An expression of surprise appeared on Diantha's face, for the intelligence was entirely unexpected.

"Yes, sir-ee, that is our little game jest at present, and we ar' going to put it through right up to the handle now, you had better believe."

"Me and my two pards hyer are going to do the job," the desperado continued. "This hyer sharp was cute enuff to be able to sneak himself out of the hands of the Vigilantes and git Judge Lynch to let him off, but when we go for him he will find that he won't have nary chance for his life. We will put it to him red-hot, and arter we git through with him he won't be of no more use to anybody in this world, hey, pards?"

The others laughed and slapped the butts of their revolvers in an extremely significant manner.

A chill of horror passed over the girl, but she had command enough of her features to prevent her feelings from being revealed by her face.

These ruffians coolly proposed to murder the stranger who had been accused of the murder of her brother, and they had revealed the scheme to her, thinking that she thirsted for revenge.

The girl would be only human to desire that the assassin of her brother should be brought to justice, but she did not feel at all sure in regard to Dick Talbot's guilt.

At first, swayed by the marshal, MacGregor, she thought there was no doubt about the matter, but when she heard the evidence she was fair-minded enough to admit that it seemed rather to show Talbot was not the assassin than that he was, and she was satisfied when Judge Lynch announced that he did not think the evidence was strong enough to warrant him in holding the prisoner.

To her mind the evidence did not warrant any other conclusion, and although the marshal was as positive as ever in regard to Talbot's guilt, his words had little weight with her, and now, when these ruffians coolly announced that they intended to kill Talbot—to murder him, in reality—the shock was great.

Confronted abruptly by this situation, for a moment she was uncertain how to act.

The men were desperadoes of the worst type, and she felt sure that if she attempted to persuade them not to commit this crime, or allowed them to see that she was not in full sympathy with them, they might be tempted to attack her.

Perceiving that Diantha was at a loss for words, Leadville Mat, who had not the slightest suspicion that the girl was not thirsting for the blood of Talbot, went on:

"This hyer sport is a daisy from way-back, but we will cook his goose all the same. He is out prospecting in the hills now, and we are jest a-laying for him hyer. When he comes along we will jump on him so quick that he will never know what hurt him until he wakes up in the other world, ho, ho, ho!" And the desperado laughed hoarsely as though he considered he had given utterance to an extremely good joke.

Diantha knew not what to say; she was like one stricken dumb.

The ruffian fancied that she was silent because she was at a loss for words to express her satisfaction at his action, and so he continued:

"I jest made up my mind that this black-hearted sharp shouldn't be able to swagger 'round this camp after having laid out one of the best men in it. He managed to slip through Judge Lynch's fingers, but you kin bet yer bottom dollar that he won't slip through mine. He won't be of no use to himself or anybody else in this world arter I get through with him. Ain't that so, pards?"

And the other ruffians with significant nods confirmed the words of their leader.

"When I saw you coming 'long the road I couldn't resist the temptation to jest let you know how the jig was working," Leadville Mat declared in conclusion.

"I—I am much obliged for your kindness," Diantha replied, hesitatingly, not knowing what to say, and anxious to escape from the presence of these dreadful men without betraying to them the mortal fear which possessed her.

"Oh, that is all right!" Leadville Mat exclaimed with a patronizing air.

"Me and my pards are going to do this leetle job for you, and we are not going to charge you a cent for it either, although I reckon thar ain't many men in this hyer camp w'ot would undertake to put sich a man as this Talbot out of the way without somebody was willing to put up a big sum of ducats for the job, but we are big friends of yours, we are, and you kin count on us, every time!"

"I—I am very much obliged; good-morning," half-stammered the girl, and then with a bow and a faint attempt at a smile she passed on.

The ruffians watched her with curious eyes.

"Say, Leadville, 'pears to me she was kinder white 'round the gills, jest as if she was skeered," Red Jack observed.

"Wal, I shouldn't wonder ef she was," Leadville Mat replied.

"We took her by surprise, of course, popping up out of the bushes, enuff to skeer any female, and how did she know that we wasn't going to harm her until we showed her w'ot we was arter."

"But I say, Leadville, I don't kinder git onto yer dodge in letting onto the gal w'ot we are going to do," Bow-legged Billy remarked.

"Ye don't, hey?"

"Nary time!"

"Neither do I," Red Jack observed. "I don't savvy worth a cent."

"Wa-al, I reckon I'm as deep as they make 'em," Leadville Mat replied with a complacent chuckle.

"The fact is, pards—don't give it away now—I am kinder stuck on this gal!"

"Go 'long!" cried Bow-legged Billy, "the marshal is arter her!"

"I know that, and I reckon thar's a heap more 'sides him, but that ain't a-saying that he is going to git her," the other retorted.

"My idee in letting on to her 'bout our leetle game was to make myself solid. Ef I lay out the man w'ot killed her brotner, won't she be apt to think that I am jest the best man in the camp, hey?"

His companions nodded assent, for the reasoning seemed good to them.

"Wa-al, now, you kin jest bet all the wealth you kin scare up that I will stand as good a chance to git the gal as any man in the town, and I don't bar the marshal out either! Oho, you kin bet I am a sly one!"

His companions expressed the opinion that that was so, and then the three hid themselves amid the bushes again.

CHAPTER XXI.

DIANTHA'S RESOLVE.

DIANTHA proceeded on her way; fifty feet further on, the trail bent abruptly to the right, and after she turned the point she was hidden from the sight of the ruffians.

A long breath of relief came from her lips and she quickened her pace, anxious to get away from the proximity of the desperadoes, but not until she was fully half a mile away did she really feel like herself again.

"Oh, this is too horrible!" she exclaimed, giving vent to her thoughts in words. "The idea that these bold, bad men are waiting in ambush for the sake of killing an unsuspecting man."

"And that murderous wretch to pretend that he is actuated solely by a desire to avenge the death of my poor brother!" the girl continued in an indignant tone.

"If he was not as dull as he is brutal he might know that I understand well enough why he hates this Dick Talbot."

"I suppose he thinks I am not aware of the fact that he assaulted this stranger and got soundly thrashed for his pains."

"That is the reason why he seeks Talbot's life, but he is fool enough to imagine that he can deceive me into believing that he is acting as my brother's avenger."

The girl strode onward at a rapid pace for fully five minutes in silence, anxiously considering the situation in her mind.

"What am I to do?" she exclaimed, abruptly, coming to a halt.

Then her eyes fell upon a mossy bank, a little remote from the trail, which seemed as though it had been placed there for the express accommodation of the weary traveler.

"I will sit down for awhile and think the matter over."

She seated herself upon the mossy bank, rested her chin on her palms and gazed thoughtfully at the wild landscape spread out before her.

At this point the trail was winding through the foot-hills; on one side rose the mountain range, and on the other was a wide and romantic valley, through which ran a small stream.

All was peace and rest, and the balmy mountain air filled the girl's soul with a feeling akin to that which swells the breast of a devotee when the holy chant of praise rings out loud and clear through the cathedral's arches.

"To think that bloodthirsty man can find it in his heart to commit the bloody crime of mur-

der amid such a scene of peace as this!" the girl murmured.

"Now, let me see—what shall I do?" she continued, musingly.

"Even if I felt positive that this stranger was the slayer of my brother I could hardly find it in my heart to allow him to be murdered in cold blood by these desperadoes without having any chance for his life."

"If they proposed to arrest and give him up to be tried by a regular court, where he would have a fair trial, that would be an entirely different matter."

"But these men do not intend to do anything of the kind. They purpose to kill him in cold blood—murder him without mercy—send him to his last account with all his sins fresh upon his head, giving him no time for prayer or repentance."

"Oh, it is too horrible!" she cried, with a sudden outburst.

"If he was the most guilty wretch in the world, he ought not to be doomed to such a fate as that, but in this case I believe him to be an innocent man. I do not think he had aught to do with my brother's death, and the verdict which released him was a just one."

"He must not die—he must not be murdered in this brutal manner!"

And in her excitement the girl sprung to her feet.

"I must and will save him!"

"The ruffians said he was amid these hills prospecting; they were waiting in an ambush by the trail so as to waylay him on his return; if I wait here it is likely that I will see him, for he must pass this point before he can reach that where those terrible men are lying in ambush. I can warn him of the danger which menaces his life, and so he will be able to avoid the peril."

The countenance of the girl glowed with a noble resolution as she uttered the words, and never in all her life had she looked more beautiful.

Just at this moment two figures came in sight, advancing along the trail from the northward.

A slight scream of joy escaped from the lips of the girl, for in one of the figures—even at the great distance—she recognized Dick Talbot.

"Heaven approves of my resolution!" Diantha exclaimed, "and brings him here so that I may warn him of the danger that awaits his footsteps!"

She was trembling now with excitement, and resumed her former seat so as to be able to compose herself before the new-comers came up.

Diantha's eyes had not deceived her.

It was Dick Talbot, accompanied by the veteran bummer, Joe Bowers, who was advancing along the trail.

They were proceeding leisurely, and speculating as they came along in regard to the girl, whom they had distinguished the moment they came in sight of her.

"Thar's a piece of calico!" Bowers remarked, as he caught sight of the female dress.

Dick Talbot, with his hawk-like eyes, recognized the girl immediately.

"It is Diantha Maxwell," he said.

"Sister of the feller whom they accused you of killing?"

"Yes."

"I got a squint at her during the trial, and see'd her and the marshal chinning together arter it."

"I understand that the marshal is hot after the girl, and the people around town seem to think they will make a match."

"Well, me noble duke, she 'pears to be a right nice gal," Bowers observed, reflectively, "and I must say I should be sorry to have her hitch teams with that black-bearded pirate."

"You don't like the marshal?"

"Not for a cent!"

"Neither do I, for I think the man is a rascal."

"You kin bet ducats onto it, mighty satrap!"

"The fellow made a dead set at me, and for no particular reason, as far as I can see."

"Well, I was a-chinning with his royal nibs, the landlord, 'bout how the marshal seemed to have it in for you, and though he was mighty keeful how he spoke 'bout the matter, evidently fearing that if he blew his nose too loudly 'bout the marshal he might git into trouble, yet from w'ot he said I saw that this black-bearded pirate is the king-pin of the town—the great Mogul, you know, and he doesn't like to have any man come into the town who is likely to give him trouble."

"Now, he sized you up, Mister Dick Talbot, right from the beginning, and I s'pose he got the notion into his noddle that you were one of the kind of roosters who would not be likely to take any back talk from anybody, and so made up his mind to get rid of you as soon as possible."

"I guess you have hit on the truth," Talbot observed. "The mayor and he are pards, too, and as I took the conceit out of his Honor on the occasion of our first interview, he will be apt to do all he can against me."

"And don't you think either the mayor or the

marshal put this Leadville Mat up to go for you?"

"Oh, yes; no doubt about it, and as that little scheme did not work, they will be apt to try another just as soon as they can hatch one up."

"Richard, me noble duke, we must keep our eyes peeled!" Bowers exclaimed.

"Well, I am not usually caught napping, and if these scoundrels succeed in getting at me without my being prepared for the attack they will have to rise pretty early in the morning."

By this time the two were within a hundred yards of where the girl sat.

Never suspecting that she wished to speak to them, the two pards were just preparing to make her a polite bow as they passed, when she surprised them by advancing into the trail, and they saw immediately that she intended to accost them, so when they came up to her they bowed and halted.

"Mr. Talbot, I have something important to say to you," Diantha said, earnestly.

By this time she had subdued her agitation so that it was not apparent in her outward seeming, although there was a higher color in her cheeks than usual and a brighter sparkle to her eyes.

"I am at your service, miss," Talbot replied.

Diantha looked at Bowers and hesitated.

The veteran did not present a prepossessing appearance, being as ragged, greasy and slouchy as usual, and the girl was in doubt whether it would be wise to speak before him or not.

"You need not hesitate to speak on his account," Talbot observed, guessing at once why Diantha hesitated. "He is not half as bad as he looks and can be trusted."

"You bet, with uncounted gold!" exclaimed Bowers in his absurd theatrical way. "Oh, I am all wool and a yard wide!"

"Mr. Talbot, I presume you know who I am?" the girl remarked.

"Oh, yes, Miss Diantha Maxwell, the sister of the unfortunate man whom I was so unjustly accused of murdering, but as there is a heaven above us, miss, I am as innocent of all knowledge of the deed as even you, yourself!"

"I believe it, sir," the girl replied.

"I was present at your trial, and was convinced then that you were unjustly accused."

"I am glad of that, for of all persons in the world you are the last one—being the sister of the murdered man—whom I would be willing to have believe I was guilty."

"I am going to give you the best proof that I consider you unjustly accused," Diantha said. "It has come to my knowledge that your life is threatened, and I have been on the watch to intercept and warn you."

"You render me a thousand times your debtor!" Talbot exclaimed.

"Oh, no, you value the service too highly. I am but doing my duty," the girl replied.

"I should consider that I was acting as a confederate of the ruffians if I permit you to go on unwarned to where the desperadoes, lurking in ambush, seek to compass your death. There are three of them, terrible ruffians I am sure from their appearance, and the leader of the party is the man known as Leadville Mat."

CHAPTER XXII.

DIAMOND CUT DIAMOND.

"LEADVILLE MAT, eh?" Talbot remarked. "Oh, yes, I am acquainted with that gentleman, and I know he has no reason to wish me well."

"He is thirsting for your blood!" the girl exclaimed, and then she related the full particulars of the interview with the ruffians.

Talbot listened attentively.

At first he had been inclined to think that there was some mistake about the matter.

Diantha had chanced to hear the bully talking loudly—as bullies are apt to do—about the dreadful punishment he was going to inflict upon the man he hated, and she had at once jumped to the conclusion that his life was really in danger.

When she had finished her story though he saw that Diantha had not exaggerated the situation.

The fact that Leadville Mat and two pards were ambushed by the side of the trail was ample proof that they "meant business."

"I am very much indebted to you for your kindness, Miss Maxwell," he said, "and I trust the time will come when I will be able to return the service. The danger is a real one, and but for your timely warning I might have fallen into a trap which would have proved fatal to me."

"I found it necessary to handle this Leadville Mat rather roughly on one occasion, and I did not think he would be anxious for another trial of my powers, although in this case he calculated to take me unawares so I would not have any chance for my life."

"But wasn't it strange that he should speak so openly to me in regard to his murderous purpose?" said the girl.

"Oh, no, the fellow is only a dull-witted, blundering scoundrel," Talbot explained.

"The man is utterly bad himself, and he judged that you were so anxious for vengeance upon the supposed murderer of your brother that you would be glad to hear the news of a plot being formed to assassinate me."

"The disclosure was made to win favor in your eyes, he, in his stupidity, thinking you would look upon him in the light of a hero."

"The wretch!" cried the girl, with a shudder. "He inspired me with the same feeling that would creep over me if I saw a snake crawling across my path."

"I say, Mister Talbot," observed Bowers, "do you notice how this hyerson of Satan has planned to work this trick?"

"He reckoned that he would catch you alone to-day, 'cos you went out without me."

"We generally go together, miss," he explained. "But this morning I took it into my noddle to explore a gulch out to the westward, so I started an hour ahead of Mister Talbot, the arrangement being that we were to meet at a certain spot 'bout two miles up in the mountains."

"Yes, the scoundrels did not anticipate that there would be two," Talbot remarked, with a deal of satisfaction.

"But now you have been warned you will be able to avoid the danger?" Diantha questioned, a little anxiously.

"Oh, yes, thanks to you, I shall be able to escape it."

And then a sudden idea occurred to Diantha.

"Do you suppose they will have any suspicion that I have warned you?" she asked.

"I guess not; I will try and arrange the matter so that it will not be possible for them to suspect that I have been warned."

"I think it will be best that they should not suspect, for such vile wretches as these men would be sure to seek to be revenged upon me for having betrayed them."

"Miss, you may rest assured that you will not be compromised by any action of mine. Would it not be wise for you to return to the camp by some other way than this main trail?"

"But I was not aware that there was another path."

"Oh, yes, I have discovered one; it is an old Indian trail—rarely used now, I fancy, but still an easily followed path, although rather narrow, and it is somewhat shorter than the main trail."

"Yes, I would rather not encounter those dreadful men again."

"There isn't any necessity for you doing so. Allow me to show you the way."

The old Indian trail was but a short distance at this point from the main road, and soon the three were following it, Talbot in the advance, Miss Maxwell next, while Bowers brought up the rear.

Talbot conducted the girl to a point from whence a view of the town could be had, and then parted with her, saying that he had not yet finished his prospecting.

Diantha shook hands warmly with Talbot, thanked him for his courtesy, and then, with a lighter heart than she had known for many a day, set out for No Man's Camp.

Talbot seated himself upon a boulder and watched the girl until her graceful figure disappeared from sight.

Bowers followed his example, excepting that he watched the face of Talbot, and paid no attention to the girl.

When Diantha disappeared in the distance, Talbot turned his gaze upon Bowers.

"Mighty fine gal, as sure as you are born!" the veteran exclaimed, impressively.

"Yes, she is a fine girl! Much better woman than her brother was a man, if the accounts which I have heard of him are true."

"I reckon they are. He was a h'ister from H'isterville."

"Say, Dick, this gal is a reg'lar thoroughbred, eh? Swings along like a race-hoss!"

"Yes, she is about as nice a woman as I have seen lately."

"And this son-of-a-gun of a marshal is likely to git her!"

"Well, I am sorry for that. A girl like this deserves a better fate than to be married to such an utter scoundrel as I feel sure is this black-bearded marshal!"

"Say, me royal nibs, as you have a crow to pick with him, why wouldn't it be a good idea for you to sail in and cut this galoot of a marshal out?"

"I don't know as the girl would have it—it would be a neat piece of work, though, and would worry this fellow, I reckon, more than I could in any other way."

"Go in and win!" suggested Bowers. "It 'pears to me that the gal kinder cast sheep's eyes at you, and any woman with half an ounce of sense ought to be glad to throw over a black-muzzled scoundrel like this thief of a marshal for a man like yourself."

"Well, I will see how things develop," Talbot remarked, thoughtfully.

"I don't deny that I am rather impressed with the looks of the girl, and then she is not only good-looking, but is a lady, too; these women, however, who are willing to link their fates with mine never seemed to be lucky."

"An evil star pursues them."

"They become mine—all seems bright before them, and then fate rudely cuts them off."

Talbot's voice softened as he spoke, and his face became dark and sorrowful.

Baleful memories of the unhappy past were in his mind.

"Well, now you speak of it, old pard, durn me if I don't believe you are about right," Joe Bowers observed, reflectively.

"You do seem to have the worst streak of luck whar women are concerned of any man I ever run across."

"You git 'em all right, and without much trouble, but you don't seem able to keep 'em."

"No, fate snatches them from me. Just as the cup of happiness is at my lips and I am enjoying the draught, some fatal blow dashes it to earth and all my hopes are rudely blasted."

"Never say die, old man," counseled the veteran. "If at first you don't succeed, try, try ag'in—"

"By the way, old pard, you told the gal that we hadn't done prospecting yet?"

"Well, that is the truth."

"But you didn't tell her that mebbe it would be men we would be prospecting arter," Bowers remarked, shrewdly.

"Yes, I believe I did not go into particulars; but then I did not think it was necessary to inform her that when a gang of this kind goes on the war-path against a gentleman of about my size they generally succeed in finding the man."

"You are kinder thinking 'bout going back and giving 'em a taste of war?"

"That is my idea."

"Do you propose to scout in and take 'em in the rear?"

"That is the programme, and then, if they have the courage to risk their lives in a fair and open fight we will try to satisfy them."

"You bet! and that is the kind of a grass-hopper I am."

From the girl's description I think I know about the spot where the gang are lying in ambush, and although the place is well-shielded from the view of any one approaching the camp from the north, yet on this side, as the ground is open, the ambush can easily be seen when one is within a couple of hundred feet; there is an abrupt bend in the trail on this side, too, at just about that distance away, so we will be able to get close to the scoundrels and surprise them instead of their surprising us."

"Mebbe they will not show fight when they find that they can't have everything their own way," suggested the veteran bummer.

"We must put up a game on them," replied Talbot.

"You must stay in the background, so that the rascals will not have any idea that there is any one with me."

"As they are three to one, the temptation to attack me will be so great that I do not believe they will be able to withstand it, even though they have failed to catch me in the ambush."

"Mighty satrap! I reckon you are right."

"After they have shown their hand then you can pop up. It will be too late for them to back out, unless they turn and run like a pack of curs, and they will have to face the music."

"The scheme is a good one, and I reckon it will work."

Then the two examined their weapons carefully, as behooved men who were about to engage in a battle where life would be apt to hang upon the goodness of a weapon.

The examination completed, the two began their retrograde march.

Thanks to Diantha's description, Talbot had correctly located the spot where the ruffians were concealed.

The two had returned to the main trail.

Talbot passed around the bend, Bowers remaining behind.

The ruffians were seated amid the bushes keeping a good watch up the trail, and their surprise was great when the man for whom they waited made his appearance in the opposite direction.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A SURPRISE.

"HELLO, hello! do you see that?" cried Leadville Mat, as his attention was attracted by the sound of Talbot's footsteps approaching, and he turned his head for the purpose of seeing who it was.

As he came round the bend Dick Talbot had purposely made a noise, so as to attract the attention of the desperadoes, yet without seeming to do so.

With such a man as he, a skilled Indian-fighter, one posted in all the wily tricks of the cunning red-skinned warriors, it was an easy matter to accomplish this without exciting the suspicions of the ruffians.

All he did was to step upon some of the dried sticks, which were scattered along the edge of the trail, and these snapping beneath his tread, gave warning of his approach.

Attracted by the words of their leader, the other ruffians stared behind them and were as amazed as Leadville Mat by the unexpected sight.

"Waal, durn me for a polecat!" Red Jack cried, "if the galoot hain't managed to git round in our rear!"

"He's been prospecting in the foot-hills, and that accounts for it," Bow-legged Billy remarked.

"It's a mighty lucky thing that he took it into his head to come up the trail ag'in, instead of going back to the camp, 'cos if he had done that we would have missed him."

"You bet, but you see luck is on our side," observed Leadville Mat.

"He's coming on, walking into the trap jest as nice as you please."

Talbot was advancing quite slowly.

He had taken a hammer from his pocket, such as are usually carried by prospectors—the eager searchers after precious metals—and being apparently busily engaged in examining all the rocks that cropped out of the earth along the trail, had not seemed to notice the men in the shadows of the bushes, although they were in full view if he had chosen to look ahead.

"The cuss hain't got his peepers onto us yet," Leadville Mat remarked in a cautious tone to his companions.

"He's too busy looking for 'color' to notice whether there is anybody round or not."

"W'ot is the peppergrass?" asked Red Jack, in the same cautious tone.

"Get your barkers out, but don't attempt to cock them until he is within 'bout fifty or sixty feet, for fear that the noise would warn him that there is danger ahead—the click of the locks working will be sure to catch his ears, and then it's good-by to any chance of taking him by surprise."

The other two nodded, for this seemed to be sound reasoning.

"When I give the word cock your revolvers as quick as you kin and go for him! The odds are a hundred to one that we will be able to salivate him afore he can get his we'pons out."

"You bet!" exclaimed Red Jack.

"True as preaching!" chimed in Bow-legged Billy.

The ruffians drew their revolvers and, squatting in the shade of the bushes, like so many huge toads, waited with bated breath for the approach of their prey.

Talbot though had no idea of allowing the desperadoes to play any little game of this kind on him.

Probably there was not a man in all the wild West who was a better judge of the skill of the frontiersman in the use of the revolver than he.

At twenty-five feet about one man out of every ten was an expert shot, and could put a bullet inside of a three-inch circle nineteen times out of twenty.

At fifteen feet not over one man in a hundred could put his ball within a six-inch bullseye six times out of ten, and at sixty or seventy feet not beyond one man in a thousand would be able to hit the mark—a six-inch circle—once out of fifty times, and when it came to over seventy feet the man who could hit an object the size of a human at that distance, would be able to bear off the palm as being an expert marksman fit to distinguish himself in any company.

Knowing these facts, Dick Talbot had no intention of approaching nearer than eighty odd feet of the ambushed men before allowing them to see that he was aware of their presence.

He was puttering around in the trail just as if he expected to find surface indications there of a rich lead; his idea was to allow the desperadoes to recover from the surprise of his unexpected appearance and give them time to come to the conclusion to attack him. And while apparently examining the ground, yet out of the corner of his eyes he kept a good lookout upon his foes.

He noted their conference—saw them draw their weapons, and by this action understood that they had come to the determination to attack him.

Only a moment or two did he waste time with his pretended examination of the ground after this.

In the most careless manner possible he raised his eyes and fixed them upon the desperadoes, giving a slight start as though surprised by the sight as he did so, at the same time dropping his hammer and clutching the revolvers belted to his waist.

A growl of rage came from Leadville Mat as he beheld this unexpected action.

"Durn the cussed luck!" he cried. "All the fat is in the fire now!"

"Right you ar!" Red Jack cried, as equally disgusted as his chief at the untoward result.

"The galoot has got his peepers onto us, and he's kinder s'picious that we ain't hyer for no good," Bow-legged Billy remarked, with the air of a sage.

"W'at ar' you going to do?" asked Red Jack, perceiving that Leadville Mat appeared to be undecided.

"Waal, I reckon we will have to climb him, anyway," the desperado chief responded, after a moment's thought. "Although it won't be

near so big a picnic for us as though we could have taken him by surprise and put our lead into him afore he knew w'at we was up to."

"Can't keno every time, you know," observed Bow-legged Billy. "You have got to give the bank some show for its life."

"Yes, you can't allers play on a sure thing," Red Jack chimed in.

"I know it, pards, but it is my game to allers run the thing that way when I can," Leadville Mat responded.

"Waal, seeing that we are three to one, it 'pears to me that we have got a pretty sure thing, anyway," Bow-legged Billy remarked.

"Yes, this hyer fight will be like the handle of a pump—all on one side," Red Jack chuckled.

"I s'pose I might as well do a bit of talking so as to let the galoot know what we are arter," Leadville Mat observed.

"When he finds that we are arter his scalp, he may want time to say a few prayers, or something of that kind."

"I reckon this sharp ain't a man who troubles himself much 'bout prayers," Bow-legged Billy rejoined.

"When he diskivers that we are going for to climb him, it is more likely that he will wrestle with a few good strong cuss-words than anything else."

"Cussing won't save his bacon," Leadville Mat responded, as he rose to his feet, his companions following his example.

As he beheld this movement Talbot drew his revolvers, and had them out and leveled by the time the desperadoes advanced five feet.

Perceiving this movement the ruffians halted, in obedience to a suggestion from Leadville Mat.

"Take it easy, boys," he said, "'tain't our game to march up to him all in a body, so he will be able to make his shots tell. Nary time! We want to separate and come at him from three different points; then he won't have no show for his life, and we will be sure to bag him."

"Keep yer eyes peeled while I speechify a bit, and kinder spread out while I am talking."

"All right; you kin trust us to do the job right up to the handle," Red Jack remarked.

"You bet; and that is the kind of tooth-picks we are!" Bow-legged Billy observed.

"How ar' you this morning, Mister Dick Talbot?" cried Leadville Mat. "How do you sagaciate 'bout this time of day?"

"Hunting for color, ain't ye? Kinder hoping, I s'pose, that you will strike a rich lead up in these foot-hills; but if ye had the sense of a bob-tailed mule you would know that thar ain't no more chance of your striking pay-dirt up into a region like this than to expect to find a crop of diamonds lying around loose among these rocks."

"Well, maybe you know all about it, and maybe you don't," Talbot replied. "Anyhow, I don't see as it is any of your business if I choose to fool away my time. You are not finding my supplies or playing in with me on grub stakes."

"Waal, I only spoke 'co's I hate to see a man make a fool of himself. It is mighty little you will diskiver up in this region!" the desperado asserted.

"I am not so sure about that. It seems to me that I have unearthed three of the biggest rascals that a man could strike in all this region!"

This bold declaration drew a growl of rage from the three pards.

"Oho! we are rascals, are we?" Leadville Mat cried.

"You're a lying galoot!" exclaimed Red Jack, in anger.

"Say, stranger, when did you git introduced to us?" Bow-legged Billy queried.

"Yes, three of the biggest scoundrels that ever 'scaped a white jail!" Talbot asserted.

"Say, I reckon, stranger, that you want to quarrel!" Leadville Mat cried, threateningly.

"And if you do we are the boyees w'ot kin give you all the fighting that you kin handle!" Red Jack declared.

"We are pards of old death, we ar', and our touch is cold and clammy," Bow-legged Billy asserted.

"When we reach for a man we ginerally git him, and the poor galoot never knows what has happened to him until he is fixed for planting."

"And you are going for me three to one, eh?" Talbot inquired.

"That is the leetle game we calculate to play," Leadville rejoined with a hoarse chuckle.

"Well, I reckon that it is a game that you will not play on me quite so successfully as you at present imagine."

"Come out, pard!"

Bowers made his appearance from behind a big rock a few paces up on the hillside.

"Oh, I'm all hyer, as the flea said to the elephant!" he announced.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE SKIRMISH.

THE desperadoes were taken completely by surprise by the unexpected appearance of Joe

Bowers, for they had no idea that there was a soul besides themselves and the man whom they hoped to slay in the neighborhood.

"Cuss me if I expected this," Leadville Mat exclaimed, his face dark with rage.

"Say, I wonder ef he has got any more pards corraled among the bushes?" Red Jack questioned, with a searching glance at the hillside, as though he thought there might be more men concealed there.

"'Pears to me that we ain't got this galoot quite so foul as we reckoned," Bow-legged Billy growled.

"Oh, this fat cuss ain't of no account, anyway!" Leadville Mat asserted.

"He has been drunk ever since he struck the town, and I'll bet a pile of rocks that he can't fight for sour apples."

"Now then, I reckon the contest will not be so uneven as you calculated," Talbot remarked.

"Three to two ain't half as big odds as three to one."

"We kin wipe you out, anyway, if you had a dozen at yer back!" Leadville Mat asserted.

"Yes, that's so!" Red Jack cried, defiantly.

"I want you to understand that we are bad men, we are! We're the cusses who are allers ready to fight at the drop of a hat!"

"And you kin bet yer boots that we allers drop our men too!" Bow-legged Billy exclaimed.

These ruffians believed to a great extent in the Chinese method of warfare.

They tried by threats and boasting, sound and fury, to inspire their foes with terror before the attack began, going on the principle that a man well scared was half-whipped.

But two worse men to try such a game upon than Dick Talbot of the iron nerve, and the veteran bummer, Joe Bowers, the man of colossal cheek, could not have been found in all the wilds of the West.

"Oho, you fellows are only talking for the pleasure of hearing the sound of your voices!" Talbot exclaimed in derision.

"You are three gas-bags!" Bowers asserted, "and if I were to stick a pin inter any one of you, the cuss would explode like a busted balloon!"

"If you have got any prayers to say or anything that you want to settle before you cash in yer checks, you had better attend to it right away, for we are going to lay you out in short order," Leadville Mat cried.

"You abused me the other night 'cos I was under the weather, and had so much bug-juice on board that I didn't know what town I was in, and now I am going to squar' the account!"

"You are all right now, then, I take it. You are not full of bug-juice?" Talbot said.

"No, sir-ee, I ain't, and I am going to salivate you so that you will wish you had never been born!"

"Talk is cheap, but it takes money to buy land!" Talbot responded, dryly.

"Sail in your elephants! I am your mutton as soon as you like."

"Yes, pitch in, I am jest hungry to wade in blood!" Joe Bowers howled, flourishing his revolver in the air.

"Go for 'em, boys!" yelled Leadville Mat.

The ruffians cocked their revolvers—during this conversation they had gradually separated so they were some six or eight feet apart—but before they could take aim at their opponents, Talbot and Bowers fired.

Both of the pards being armed with self-cocking revolvers, they were not obliged to go through the movement of raising the hammer, and the desperadoes were taken entirely by surprise.

During the talk the foemen had drawn nearer to each other, so they were not much over fifty feet apart.

At that distance two such capital shots as Dick Talbot and Joe Bowers could not fail to hit their men.

Talbot had aimed at Leadville Mat, who stood opposite to him, and the veteran bummer covered Red Jack.

The pards fired their revolvers so closely together that the discharges sounded like one report.

A yell of pain coming from the lips of the desperadoes showed that the marksmanship of the pards was as good as ever.

Red Jack was down with a bullet in his shoulder, and Leadville Mat first grasped convulsively at the sky, and then fell forward on his face.

The abrupt downfall of his two companions was enough for Bow-legged Billy.

He did not even wait to fire a shot to revenge the slaughter of his comrades, but wheeled around and fled up the trail at a rate of speed which would not have disgraced a crack runner contesting for a prize.

"Shall I wing him, Dick?" exclaimed Joe Bowers, leveling his revolver in the direction of the fugitive.

"Oh, no, build a bridge of gold for a fleeing enemy, as the Spaniards say," Talbot responded. "Besides, the chances are about ten to one now that you couldn't hit him if you tried for the fellow is almost out of range."

"Say, this picnic has ended too durned quick!" the veteran bummer growled. "I am jest reg-

hot for slaughter, and this hain't been no kind of a fight at all."

"You want too much pork for your shilling; be content!" Talbot answered.

"Let us examine our men; one of them seems to be done for."

This appeared to be so, for Leadville Mat had not moved after he struck the earth.

With Red Jack the case was different; although the desperado had received a bad wound, which was so painful as to extort the most horrid curses from him which the lips of man could utter, yet he was doing his best to get a shot at his foes.

The wound being in his right shoulder affected the use of that arm, so he was not able to hold his pistol in his right hand, the attempt to do so making him groan with pain; therefore he changed his pistol to his left hand, and as the two pards approached, he endeavored to draw a "bead" on them.

"Look out for that p'isoned sarpint!" the veteran exclaimed, perceiving the movement, and both the pards leveled their weapons at the wounded desperado.

But Red Jack had arrived at that stage when he didn't care whether he lived or died, and so, despite the leveled pistols, he discharged his revolver, but under the circumstances, tortured as was the man with the pain of his wound, it was no wonder that his bullet flew wide of the mark, not coming within a yard of either of the pards.

When he saw that his shot had failed, a fresh torrent of curses came from him, and he attempted to raise the hammer of the weapon in order to get another shot.

Joe Bowers put a stop to this little game, though, by hastening to the man and with a dextrous kick sending the weapon spinning out of his hand.

"You murdering, red-handed marauder!" cried the veteran bummer, in a rage. "I have a good mind to boot you clear from hyer to No Man's Camp, you ornery, no-souled, white-livered cuss, you!"

Red Jack glared at the speaker in defiance. "I'll have yer life for this one of these days!" he cried.

"No, you kin jest bet yer bottom dollar you won't!" Joe Bowers declared. And then from a secret pocket in his breeches the veteran produced a small but powerful lariat and proceeded to adjust the noose in it.

"Hallo, what are you about?" Talbot asked.

"I am going to string this cuss up to some one of these pines and leave him hyer as a warning to the crows," the veteran responded, and then, with all the professional dexterity of the skilled hangman, he threw the noose around the neck of the wounded ruffian.

Red Jack fairly turned pale; although he had been ready to fight his foes to the death, even when wounded and in their hands—had by his actions courted the death-stroke—yet his soul shrank in terror from such a fate as this.

Many and many a time had some man, whom he had abused and made a victim, prophesied that the time would come when he would feel the hangman's noose tighten around his bull neck, and, laughing defiantly, had vowed that that minute would never arrive.

It was about the only thing this hardened ruffian feared, and so, when he found Joe Bowers proposed to play hangman, he protested.

"Say, that ain't the kind of a death for a man like me!" he exclaimed. "I am a chief, I am, and I don't want to be strangled with a rope like a durned dog!"

"You red-headed scoundrel! that is jest the death you are going to die, and don't you forget it!" Bowers retorted, and as he spoke he gave the lariat a vicious pull which unpleasantly tightened the noose around the ruffian's neck.

"Ah, oh!" gasped Red Jack; "I say, let up on this cussed rope, an' take yer pistol and blow my brains out so I kin die like a gentleman!"

"Nary time! You are a mean whelp, and you shall die like a worthless yaller dog!" and Bowers gave the rope another twitch.

"Hold on and I'll tell yer a thing or two which, mebbe, your pard thar will think is worth knowing."

"Oho! well, now, you are kinder talking a leetle sense, and I don't know but what I will go you. W'ot do you say, Mister Talbot?"

Dick had been taking a look at Leadville Mat, and was not able to decide whether the man was dead or not.

The bullet had struck him in the breast, passing through the lungs, and though he was senseless and apparently dead, yet Talbot fancied that life had not altogether fled.

"Do as you please," Talbot replied. "The fellow richly deserves to be hung, but if you choose to spare his life I am willing."

"Oh, I don't keer a cuss for life!" the man protested. "I am game to the backbone, but I don't want to take part in no hanging match. I kin put you in the way of a bit of news which I reckon you don't know."

"Spit it out and maybe we will postpone this picnic," Bowers suggested.

The marshal and the mayor have both got it in for you, Dick Talbot, and have made up their minds to drive you out of the camp. They

were the fellows that put up this job on you. We were to have a hundred apiece if we succeeded in wiping you out."

"Reckon that is good enuff to let the cuss pass on?" Bowers asked.

"Yes, I guess so."

"You have had a narrow squeak of it," the bummer observed as he removed the lariat. "The next time I will swing you off though, for sure!"

"I will send up a doctor to you when I reach the camp," Talbot remarked as he departed in company with Bowers, leaving the wounded ruffian to curse the ill-luck which had brought him into such a plight.

CHAPTER XXV.

A NEW FOE.

On the way to the camp Dick Talbot and Joe Bowers discussed the situation.

"W'ot do you make of it, me noble duke?" the veteran asked. "Do you s'pose you kin take the word of this chap, or was he only making up a yarn so as to get out of the leetle hanging match?"

"I guess that it is a sure-enough fact," Talbot replied. "All the circumstances seem to point to it. Of course it was natural for Leadville Mat to attack me, for he was smarting under the defeat I gave him in the saloon, and these fellows, being his pards, would be apt to chip in to help him, but from the fact that the men laid in ambush for me—evidently carrying out a carefully-planned scheme, it would seem as though some long-headed plotter was at the back of it."

"That's so."

"With such common ruffians as these three desperadoes, you know, the way they would have probably worked the matter, would have been to attack me in the camp. They would never have gone to the trouble of planning any such scheme as this little picnic that they tried to spring on me to-day."

"I reckon you are right; the mayor and the marshal are at the bottom of the b'ling."

"Yes, undoubtedly! Although the testimony of such a scoundrel as this red-bearded ruffian could hardly be believed under oath, yet I am satisfied he spoke the truth to-day."

"Well, lemme see; this hyer thing won't do," Bowers remarked, thoughtfully. "You ain't the kind of man to allow any sich liberties as this hyer to be taken with you with impunity."

"I reckon you will have to call on this hyer mayor and marshal to step up to the captain's office and settle."

"Yes; but I must have some better ground to go on than the mere assertion of this scoundrel. If I should charge the two men with attempting my life they would deny it, of course, and I couldn't very well bring the man forward as a witness, for when he is in the camp and secure from our vengeance, he, naturally, would deny the whole thing."

"True as preaching! It was the lariat round his neck and my good right arm a-yanking at the end that brought him to his milk."

"Yes; and he wouldn't back us up. The mayor has reason to have a grudge against me, but there isn't any reason why the marshal should go for me, excepting that he fears I might prove to be a dangerous man to handle in case the occasion should arise for me to take a position in opposition to him."

"Of course I am not the kind of man to stand anything of this sort. No man ever yet went 'hunting' for me without being afforded all the chance of finding me that he wanted."

"I shall keep my eyes open; if the mayor and the marshal are at the bottom of this thing, they will try some new dodge, perhaps show their hand so I can call them personally to an account; and if they persist in keeping in the background then I will set my wits to work to devise some scheme to compel them to come to the front and meet the responsibility."

The further conversation was of no particular importance, and so we will not take up space by detailing it.

When the pair reached the town they went to the hotel with the idea of getting on the doctor's track, and were lucky enough to find the O'Donohue there.

As usual the Irishman had been drinking, but not enough to prevent him from attending to any professional duties.

When he was informed that Leadville Mat and a red-bearded pard—whom the O'Donohue identified immediately as Red Jack—had been hurt on the northern trail about a mile from the camp he was immediately interested.

"How did they happen to get hurt—what sort of an accident?" he inquired.

"Well, I reckon their hurts came from the careless handling of firearms," Talbot replied, in his quiet way and without the vestige of a smile.

There were quite a number in the hotel, and the bystanders, who were listening eagerly, looked at each other, for they perceived immediately that there was something mysterious about the affair.

"Red Jack, as you call him, has a bullet in the shoulder, a rather ugly wound I should fancy from the way the man swore," Talbot explained.

"And Leadville Mat is shot through the breast,

and I am afraid that he is a goner, for when I came away he showed no signs of life."

"You'll have to rig some way to carry them, for neither one can walk, and it wouldn't be a bad idea to tell the mayor and the marshal about the matter."

"All right, I will!"

Away hurried the doctor, while the two pards retired to their apartments.

The miners were no fools, and it did not take them long to guess the truth, particularly when some one in the room related how Leadville Mat, with Red Jack and Bow-legged Billy, had been seen to leave the camp that morning, taking the northern trail.

The inference was plain: the strangers sharp had encountered the party in the hills, there had been a fight—that there was bad blood between Leadville Mat and Dick Talbot was well known—Leadville and Red Jack had bit the dust—fallen before the prowess of the new-comer.

It was not twenty minutes before the story was all over town, and the O'Donohue was accompanied by a small army when he started on his quest.

The disgust of Mayor White and Black Mac, when the tidings were brought to them, was great.

"This infernal sharp has the devil's own luck!" the mayor exclaimed.

"Yes, it would seem so."

"The idea that he succeeded in laying out two good men like Leadville Mat and Red Jack!"

Nothing had been said in regard to Bowers, although he had come in with Talbot, for it was not supposed that the fat bummer was anything of a warrior, and all the town had jumped to the conclusion that Dick Talbot had disabled both men, single-handed.

The brow of the marshal was dark, but he was sparing of his words, and about all he said was:

"We will have to get rid of this Talbot in some way pretty soon or he will run the whole camp."

In due time the doctor arrived with the wounded men.

Leadville Mat was not dead, nor was his wound really as serious as Red Jack's, although it was of such a nature that it had brought on a fainting spell when first inflicted, which seemed like death.

In spite of this, though, the doctor announced that, thanks to the strong constitution of the wounded man, he would be around again in a week or two.

The tale of Dick Talbot's battle with the two chiefs soon reached the ears of Johnny Sands, the Tiger of Tucson, and it rather made him open his eyes.

"Hello, hello!" he muttered, "this cuss has got considerable sand in him after all. I reckon it ain't going to be sich a picnic as I anticipated."

The landlord had his eyes on Johnny Sands, and did not fail to notice how interested he was in getting at the particulars of Talbot's encounter with the ruffians.

The conversation that he had had with the stranger in regard to Talbot immediately recurred to him.

"Oho, I smell a mice," he remarked. "This hyer galoot kinder has an idea of tackling the sharp, and I reckon I had better say a few words to put him on his guard."

So up stairs to Talbot's room the landlord proceeded and soon Talbot was in possession of all the landlord's information.

"Well, if he is anxious to test my quality I shall have to accommodate him, I suppose," the sport remarked.

"But it seems to me, as I appear destined to be continually engaged in these personal difficulties, that I might as well engage a shanty and hang out a shingle notifying the world at large that I am a chief and stand ready to fight any bully that comes along."

"Mighty good idee!" commented Bowers.

"Lemme place you on exhibition. Two bits to see the champion fighter of No Man's Camp, open to meet the world, bar none, with any weapons from toothpicks up to ten-pounders."

"I can tell you one thing!" exclaimed Talbot, who was really more annoyed than he cared to show by the circumstance. "If this fellow does attempt to pick a quarrel with me, without any reason whatever, I will give him such a lesson as will be apt to deter anybody else from trying it on for awhile, for I am losing my patience, and that is something that I haven't a great quantity of at any time."

"I did not come to No Man's Camp to pose as the champion fighter of the town, ready to give battle at a moment's warning with every overgrown fool who happens to stray into the town and is anxious to make a reputation as a fighter. I seek no fame in that line, and the next man that provokes me I will be apt to hurt pretty badly, if I can."

"That's the talk! Go in, lemons, if you do get squeezed!" ejaculated Bowers.

"This fellow is a bummer if you kin believe him," the landlord remarked. "He got to blowing his horn around to-day; said he was known as the Tiger of Tucson, and had killed so

many men that he had been warned out of 'bout every camp in Southern Arizona and New Mexico, and the sheriffs were so thick arter him that he was obliged to make for this town, knowing that the officers wouldn't dare to come hyer arter him.

"I said—jest quietly, you know—that in my time I had heerd some chaps tell big yarns afore.

"He took the hint and sed if I doubted him all I had to do was to ax Marshal MacGregor; Black Mac, he sed, knew him of old, and would testify that he was as bad a man as ever struck this camp."

Talbot and Bowers exchanged glances. The same thought occurred to both. Was this another man set on by the marshal to attack Talbot?

The landlord was thanked for his friendly warning and he departed.

"The marshal and I will have it hot and heavy before long, I guess," Talbot remarked.

All the saloons in the town were unusually crowded that night, for the news of the fight on the hillside had traveled far and wide, and all the miners were anxious to talk the matter over.

Talbot and Bowers had dropped into the Golden Hairpin Saloon, with the idea of joining the poker party which generally got together about nine o'clock.

They were standing in one corner by the bar when the door of the saloon was abruptly flung open and Johnny Sands, the Tiger of Tucson, made his appearance.

He halted in the doorway and scanned the occupants of the room, while every eye was fixed upon him.

CHAPTER XXVI.

ANOTHER DIFFICULTY.

BOTH Talbot and Bowers recognized the man immediately by the description which the landlord had given of him.

"Thar he is, the Tiger of Tucson, for sure!" Bowers exclaimed, in Talbot's ears. "And I say, me noble duke, he looks like a kind of a dangerous cuss; I reckon that feller will fight."

"Yes; it is his trade, like the soldiers of fortune in the olden time who traveled over the world selling their swords to the highest bidder."

"And it is a hoss to a hen that he is hunting you."

"He will find me, too!" Talbot remarked, in a voice full of firm determination.

Bowers, well acquainted with his companion, saw that he was unusually excited, although in his stern, impassive features there was no trace of any such thing; but there was a glint of fire in the dark eyes and a peculiar compression of the mouth which to the experienced eyes of the veteran bummer revealed volumes.

"How are ye, gen'lemen; hope I see you all well?" the Tiger of Tucson remarked.

"Got a right smart town hyer, I reckon; 'bout as lively a camp as I have seen for a dog's age."

"It does me proud to find myself in sich good company."

"In course, I s'pose you don't know me, gen'lemen, although I have no doubt that a great many of you have heard on me, so I will have to introduce myself."

"My name is Johnny Sands, and I am a gay boy from Arizona."

"I've got a handle to my name, too. Up in the silver region they used to call me the Tiger of Tucson, and folks do say that I have wiped out as many men as any chief that ever war in this section of country."

"But I ain't the kind of man to boast of what I have done or what I kin do. All I have to say is, trot out your best fighter, feller-citizens, and lemme see what I can do with him."

The miners looked at each other, but no one stirred to accept the bold defiance.

"I reckon he is kinder squinting at you, mighty satrap," Bowers remarked to Talbot, perceiving that the new-comer was glancing in their direction.

"I should not be surprised; but he will have to speak plainer than that. I am not going around knocking chips off any man's shoulders," Talbot rejoined.

In his mind there was not the least doubt that the defiance was intended for him, but he was determined to make the man challenge him directly.

"It seems to me, gents, that you are all very backward in coming forward," the new-comer remarked, after waiting for a moment and perceiving that no one stirred.

"Surely there is some fighter in the room who will not let a stranger crow over his camp," the Tiger of Tucson continued.

"Whar is this card-sharp who calls hizself Dick Talbot?"

This was direct enough in all conscience.

Every eye in the place was fixed on Talbot, who had leaned up against the bar and was apparently the most unconcerned man in the saloon.

"Eh?" he queried, with an expression of surprise; "did I understand you to inquire after me?"

"Is your name Dick Talbot?"

"That is my handle, stranger," and as he spoke Talbot took out a little pearl-handled pen-knife and began to pare his nails in perfect unconcern.

The new-comer looked a little surprised, for from what he had heard of Talbot he was led to imagine that he would be quick to accept a defiance to battle, and yet now the man did not seem disposed to understand him.

"Durn me if I don't believe the galoot is going to show the white feather!" Johnny Sands muttered to himself, and straightway his bosom began to swell with pride.

To come into a strange camp and back down the supposed-to-be best man in it, was no small triumph.

And acting on the supposition that the quiet sharp was in no mood for a personal difficulty, the bully determined to make as much of his victory as possible.

So he sauntered slowly up to Talbot, and did not pause until he was within a yard of him.

"Say, sport, thar ain't no mistake 'bout this thing, is thar?" he asked, affecting an anxious air.

"Mistake—how?"

"Your name is Talbot?"

"Yes, sir."

"Dick Talbot?"

"So I am called."

"And you are one of the big chiefs of No Man's Camp?"

"Well, I don't know about that," and Talbot smiled as pleasantly as though he thought this sort of questioning was a good joke.

"You see, I am almost a stranger here, and I don't know whether I am one of the big chiefs or not. You will have to wait until I get better acquainted with the people before I can give a decided answer to that question."

"Well, I reckon you ain't much of a chief, anyhow!" Johnny Sands exclaimed in an extremely contemptuous way.

"For if you was you wouldn't let a man come and bluff you down like this."

"Like what?" and the innocent expression upon Talbot's face was really charming.

"Why, like what I am doing!" cried Johnny Sands, not knowing what to make of the matter.

"Don't you understand that I am hyer arter a fight?"

"A fight?"

"Yes."

"What for?"

"Jest for fun! for greens, you know. I reckoned you would be my antelope, but thar must be some mistake 'bout the matter, for you ain't got any sand."

"Who says so?"

"I do."

"No sand?"

"Nary time!"

"And you want to fight, right bad?"

"The wu'st kind of way; I am jest sp'iling for a tussle."

"I'm your man then," and Talbot seized the Tiger of Tucson with a quickness that was really surprising.

The new-comer, waking too late to the consciousness that Talbot had been making a fool of him, endeavored to protect himself from the attack, but the onset was so sudden that he had no chance.

Talbot grabbed him by the collar with one hand, and clutched him by the belt with the other.

Johnny Sands was a strong man as men go, but he was almost as helpless in the grasp of his antagonist as a rat in the fangs of a terrier.

Never in this world did mortal man ever receive a more terrific shaking than Dick Talbot administered to the struggling Tiger of Tucson.

"You want a fight, eh?" quoth Talbot, all the while shaking the other in the most vigorous manner.

"You came here on purpose to pick a quarrel with me, and you are so durned mysterious about it that it takes me about half an hour to find out what you are after, you are such a stupid blockhead!"

And the sport punctuated his remarks by giving the other a more vigorous shake every now and then.

He shook the man until his revolvers dropped out of their holsters to the floor—shook him until the bowie-knife kept the revolvers company—shook him until the Tiger of Tucson was as red in the face as a turkey-cock—until his teeth fairly chattered, and he seemed to be in danger of dying by strangulation.

The man was so exhausted that he could hardly stand.

Perceiving which Talbot again grabbed him by the collar, turned him around, headed the fellow straight for the door, and when the portal was reached, with one tremendous kick Dick Talbot sent the vanquished bully flying into the street.

The bystanders were roaring with laughter. Never since the first cabin had been erected in No Man's Camp had such a ridiculous scene been enacted within its limits.

Never had a boasting bully been more thoroughly whipped, and the job had been performed

in such a way, too, that it had been as good as a comedy to the lookers-on.

As the old landlord exclaimed—he had laughed until the tears fairly came into his eyes:

"Durn me if it wasn't the richest thing I ever see'd in all my born days!"

"Why, I wouldn't have been willing to have missed it for a ten-dollar note!"

And this was the general opinion. Not a man who witnessed the scene was willing to admit that he had ever seen anything more laughable in his life.

When he returned to his former position Talbot picked up the weapons of the discomfited Tiger of Tucson and passed them over the bar to Billy Robinson.

"Here, barkeeper, you had better take care of these tools until the gentleman calls for them, which will be to-morrow most likely; I hardly think he will feel like putting in an appearance to-night."

And at this there was a general laugh, for few within the room were of a contrary opinion.

The marshal and the mayor happened to be coming up the street just as Talbot kicked the Tiger of Tucson through the door, so they had a chance to witness the downfall of the bully as he went headlong into the dust of the road.

A bitter curse came from the lips of Black Mac, for he recognized the actors in the scene, and immediately guessed what had transpired.

"Hallo, that was Talbot!" cried Mayor White, "and who the deuce is the fellow that he booted in that extremely effective manner?"

"Who is it?" cried the marshal, with bitter accent, "why, one of the worst men in all Arizona—a fellow called Johnny Sands, the Tiger of Tucson—a desperado who has killed more men than he has fingers and toes!"

"He came to town to-day and called on me, and I, thinking I had struck the very man for our purpose, advised him to introduce himself to No Man's Camp by cleaning out this Talbot."

"Well, well!" cried the mayor, in astonishment.

"He jumped at the idea, and knowing the man to be really a fighter I fancied he could do the job."

"But he has evidently made a complete failure," Mayor White observed. "For Talbot has kicked him into the street as though he had been a drunken bummer."

"Yes; I can't understand it, unless Sands is full of liquor; but let us pick him up."

The two hurried to the assistance of the prostrate man and helped him to his feet.

"What is the matter, Johnny?" Black Mac asked. "You seem to have come out of the little end of the horn."

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE POKER PARTY.

It was a couple of minutes before the Tiger of Tucson could get breath enough to speak, and then he gasped:

"That galoot of a Talbot!"

"Yes; you have been having trouble with him," Mayor White remarked, in a sympathizing way.

He had "been there" himself and he knew how it was.

He knew just how strong the iron-limbed Dick Talbot was, and could appreciate the feelings of the stranger who had been so roughly handled.

"The man don't look so big, but he is a giant!" Johnny Sands protested.

"Yes, yes; he is a very big little man, and when he hits a feller the cuss kinder gets an idea that a brick house has fallen on him," observed White, whose visage still bore witness to the sharp's prowess.

"Well, he didn't hit me, but grabbed me by the throat and shook me until I believe every tooth in my head is loose," the bully explained.

"How was it that you allowed him to get hold of you?" the marshal asked.

"Why, because I was a fool," the other answered, angrily.

"I never ran up ag'in' such a feller afore. He talked so nice and quiet that I thought I had him scared, and I hadn't the least idee that thar was a bit of fight in him, but he was playing roots on me all the time, and the furst thing I knew he grabbed me by the throat and pretty near shook the insides all out of me."

"I s'pose you ain't anxious for any more of him, eh?" suggested the marshal.

"Not in that way, you bet!" replied the Tiger of Tucson, emphatically.

"Why, pard, I was like a child in his hands; the cuss is a reg'lar giant! And I don't pretend to be much with my fists, anyway; I am a shooter and a cutter, I am; that is my best holts."

"If I hadn't made the biggest kind of a donkey of myself a-chinning with the galoot, and had gone for him with my weapons, as I ought to have done, I reckon he wouldn't have got the best of me."

"But where are your weapons?" asked the marshal, noticing that Johnny Sands's holsters were empty.

"Surely you wasn't idiot enough to leave your

weapons at home when you went on the war-path against a man like this Talbot?"

"Of course not!" the Tiger of Tucson replied, indignantly. "I had two six-shooters and as good a knife as ever a man wore, but the cuss shook me until he shook every durned weapon onto the floor. Took 'em right away from me, mind, without the least bit of trouble."

"Well, I must say that for a man of your reputation you have made the meanest kind of a show in this difficulty!" the marshal exclaimed.

"I know it! I know it! I ain't saying that I didn't, am I?" cried the bully, his voice hoarse with passion.

"Don't I tell yer the galoot got me foul, and I had no more chance for my white alley than if I had been a ten-year-old kid? But I ain't through with the cuss yet!" and the desperado shook his head in a menacing way.

"As I was a-saying, I never went much on my fists, but when it comes to weapons I am a hoss, I am!"

"Are you going to try him on again to-night?" the mayor asked.

"No, not this evening—some other evening; I have got enuff for to-night. I'm no hog, I ain't; no one ever accused me of being a hog, and I know when I git enuff."

"I'm all broke up to-night and I am going to haul off for repairs. I'll send 'round to-morrow arter my weapons, and send word, too, to this Talbot that I intend to kill him on sight. That is the gentlemanly way to work the trick, you know, and then if I don't lay him out the cuss is a smarter man than I think he is!"

"Well, he is a thorough-going sport, and I reckon he is a mighty handy man, no matter how you take him," Black Mac observed.

"You don't want to make the mistake of holding him too cheap, you know, or else he may get away with you the second time worse than he did the first."

"Oh, that is all right. I have cut my eye-teeth, and the man will never fool me ag'in," Johnny Sands replied.

"I admit his quiet, cool way did play blazes with me to-night, but he will never play no roots on me ag'in."

"Well, so-long, I'm off. The durned galoot shook me so hard that my bones ache even now just as if somebody had been beating me with a broomstick. I won't feel like myself until I have had four or five big drinks and a good snooze to quiet me down."

And then the Tiger of Tucson departed, about as thoroughly disgusted as any man had ever been in No Man's Camp.

The mayor and the marshal gazed after him for a few moments in silence and then White asked:

"What do you think about it, Mac—do you think the cuss has got the sand to face Talbot again after being whaled so to-night?"

"Oh, yes, I think so. I don't think there is any doubt about it. I know the man of old and he is one of the most reckless devils that ever pulled a trigger in this Western country. I don't know a man who has been in more bloody affrays or has killed more men than this fellow, and he is game to the backbone, too; he has proved that fifty times."

"In this case it is just as he says; Talbot was smart enough to get him at a disadvantage, but in the future he will be on his guard, and the chances are big that this little affair to-night may cost the bold sport his life."

"Well, I hope that it may be so, for, Mac, I feel that this Talbot is a mighty dangerous man."

"Yes, I have a presentiment that if we don't get rid of him he, in time, will make No Man's Camp too hot to hold us."

"I hope not, but, as you say, it looks as if he might prove troublesome."

"Are you going in to try a little poker to-night?" the mayor added.

"Yes, I don't know but what I will."

"Mebbe this sport will take a hand, and then we will have a chance to examine him at our leisure."

"Yes, it would not be a bad idea."

Then the two entered the Golden Hairpin Saloon.

As they had anticipated, the poker party was just about to begin operations, and the members gladly welcomed the new-comers.

There was the landlord of the Metropolitan, Alex Broadbent, the Express agent, and a couple of the leading miners from up the gulch.

The O'Donohue had a great idea of joining in the game, but when he found that the ante was to be a dollar, he declined in disgust, for, as he said, what show would a man with only "tin" dollars in his pocket stand in any such high-toned game?

The mayor and the marshal joined in the game and Talbot sauntered up to watch the fun, Bowers at his elbow as usual.

At the end of half an hour the two miners had got rid of all their wealth and retired; the mayor and the marshal were both heavy winners, while the others were behind.

"Won't you sit down, Mr. Talbot, and take a hand?" the landlord asked.

"Mebbe if a new man came into the game it

would change my luck. I never saw such an infernal run of bad hands in my life, and I say, emphatically, cuss the luck!"

"Don't swear or you won't catch any fish!" Joe Bowers warned.

"Well, I don't mind trying a few hands," Talbot replied, and he took his place at the table.

Again the game proceeded, and before half a dozen hands had been played all at the table came to the conclusion that the new-comer was fully as good a gamester as the town of No Man's Camp could boast.

He was a steady winner, although he was not particularly lucky in regard to holding good hands, but he knew the value of cards, was a shrewd calculator of chances, besides being an expert in reading men's faces, and so getting at a knowledge as to the goodness of their hands.

Then, too, as he was an old and experienced player, he soon mastered the secret of each man's play.

The landlord had no particular method, but played as he felt; sometimes he would venture largely on weak hands, and then again hesitate about backing good ones.

He was what is called a "skeery" player and a resolute bettor always frightened him.

The mayor always went in for what he considered to be a sure thing, and would not venture much without feeling certain that he had an exceedingly strong hand. This was also the Express agent's game.

MacGregor, on the contrary, was a bold and reckless bidder—a man given to bluffing and "stealing pots" on weak hands.

By eleven o'clock the landlord, the Express agent, and the mayor were busted; only Talbot and the marshal remained in the game.

They were about even as far as wealth was concerned.

It had become a duel between the two.

The marshal had been extremely fortunate in holding good hands all the evening, and as he thought himself fully as good a player as his opponent he felt satisfied he could "clean him out."

In the first deal after the others retired the marshal was fortunate enough to get three queens, an ace and a king, and even a less reckless bettor than he would have felt justified in betting about all he was worth on such a hand.

That Talbot's hand was not good he felt sure, for the sport had asked for three cards, only retaining two.

The marshal discarded the king, hoping in the draw to get another one, but only caught a two-spot.

He began to "plunge" in the betting. Talbot had ventured five dollars on his hand, which Black Mac immediately "saw" and went him a hundred better.

Talbot was evidently deterred by this heavy bet, and hesitated for a few moments before he ventured to put up more money.

Again the marshal promptly raised him a hundred, and so it went on until every cent of their respective piles was wagered.

"I'll 'call' you," Talbot remarked, as he put up his last hundred.

The marshal displayed his hand, and then in triumph asked:

"What have you got?"

"Two pairs," responded the sport.

"The pot is mine then!" cried the marshal.

"Oh, no, mine are two pairs of tens!"

It was the old joke, but it was effective.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A DEEP SCHEME.

ALL around the table laughed as Dick Talbot laid down four tens, the marshal excepted.

A heavy frown gathered on his brow, and for a moment he looked ugly.

The mayor had his eyes on his fellow-official, for he expected that there was going to be trouble.

Talbot also was on his guard.

He and Black Mac sat on opposite sides of the table, facing each other.

And when Talbot laid down his cards, he gently thrust his left hand into an opening in the bosom of his shirt, just above the waist.

This action was concealed from his opponent by the table, and even the landlord who was at his side would have supposed that he had merely placed his hand on his lap, if he had noticed the action, which he did not, for his attention was occupied by the display of the cards.

Bowers, though, knowing his pard's "games" so well, understood what he was up to.

Talbot's hand grasped a cocked derringer secreted in a secret pocket in the shirt, and if the marshal manifested any disposition to be ugly, Talbot could have had him "covered" with the derringer long before he could possibly have got his revolver out and ready for action.

For a moment there was a solemn hush; every eye anxiously fixed upon the marshal, as all the lookers-on were wondering what he was going to do.

Black Mac was known to be a man of violent passions, and from the look upon his face, it was the general anticipation that there was going to be trouble.

He stared at the four tens displayed by Dick Talbot, face upward, upon the table, as if he thought there was something wrong about them.

Then he looked at his own hand, his dark brows knit.

The lookers-on almost held their breath as though they thought a movement on their part would precipitate a tragedy.

For fully a minute the suspense lasted, and then, with a grimace, the marshal laid his hand down upon the table, the cards face upward, saying:

"Your hand is good and the pot is yours. I give it up!"

All present drew a long breath—there wasn't going to be any trouble after all.

Frisco Nell had been "dealing" at the faro table, but she had had her eyes upon the poker party, the faro-table being so situated that from the chair she occupied she could look behind the curtain which served to screen the poker table from the rest of the saloon.

And when she saw that the game had become a duel between the marshal and the strange sport, and that both were betting heavily, she called Old Man Finnegan to take her place at the table, rose and sauntered to where the curtain ran from the wall.

In the opening she stood, watching the game, apparently much interested in the struggle.

She was leaning carelessly against the wall, with her right hand thrust into the pocket of her dress.

None of the party paid any particular attention to her, for it was only natural that she should feel a curiosity in regard to the result of this duel at cards.

None of them suspected that the white, jeweled hand of the girl grasped the butt of a self-cocking revolver, and that if there had been any trouble—if weapons were drawn—she stood a fine chance of getting the first shot.

"If the design is to provoke Talbot into a quarrel and then slay him, I will give the marshal his pass to the happy hunting-grounds before he has a chance to use his weapon!" she murmured between her firm-set teeth.

Frisco Nell believed there was a plot, and that the stranger was to be a victim.

Even the speech of the marshal did not reassure her, for she suspected treachery and thought he was trying to throw Talbot off his guard, and so she did not relax her vigilance.

"But I say, partner, do you think it is quite the square thing to fool any man with such an old gag as the two-pair business?" the marshal continued, in quite a pleasant tone.

"Well, you know a joke now and then is relished by the wisest men," Talbot replied, as he put out his hand and swept the money over to his side of the table.

"Very true, but it is a rough deal on me," Black Mac remarked.

A general "snicker" went around the table at this admission.

The crowd is always ready to cheer for the victorious side.

"You kinder got the best of me this time and I shall expect you to give me my revenge," Black Mac observed.

"Certainly, I shall be pleased so to do whenever you want it. Are you through for to-night?" Talbot inquired.

"Yes, I am cleaned out."

"We have all of us suffered," the landlord remarked, "but from the way that things were going I thought the marshal was going to carry off the ducats."

"Well, it did look like it until Mr. Talbot here took me into camp on his two pair," the marshal observed.

"You played your game mighty fine, sir, I will have to admit that," he continued, addressing Talbot.

"You fooled me completely, for I had no idea that you held any four of a kind."

"I had two in the beginning and caught the other pair in the draw," Talbot remarked.

"Well, if I had had such a hand as that I would have been willing to bet about everything I had in the world on it," Black Mac remarked.

"So would I!" exclaimed the landlord.

"It was a good hand, but there are better in the pack," said the Express agent.

"Yes, four of them, jacks, queens, kings and aces, allowing that straight flushes are not counted as beating four of a kind, which is only a bastard sort of poker, anyhow, and not recognized by old players," Talbot remarked.

"And then there is another point, gentlemen, which must be taken into consideration when you come to calculate chances."

"There were only two of us in the game—only two hands out, and the chance was a good many hundred times better that four tens would not be beaten than if there had been six or eight at the table."

This statement had the effect of opening the eyes of the rest to the fact that Talbot was a man who when he played poker depended a good deal upon calculation—who believed in science and skill rather than in dumb luck.

"Well, now you are getting in too deep for me," the Express agent declared.

"Yes, I'm over my head, too, and shall have to swim out," the landlord remarked.

"I have heard a good deal about men playing poker according to rule, but I never took much stock in it, although from the way you have come out to-night it looks as if there was something in the thing," the Metropolitan host continued.

"Well, it is all right for a man who calculates to make a business of it," the marshal observed, "but for the plain, every-day fellow who just plays poker once in a while for amusement, it don't amount to much."

"But let's have a drink, gentlemen, and then I'm off for bed."

The party rose from the table and went up to the bar.

By this time 'Frisco Nell had got around behind the counter.

Despite the marshal's smooth way she did not believe that he was satisfied to lose his money without a quarrel, and she thought he was arranging some trap in which to catch the stranger sport, so she kept a wary eye upon him.

She wronged the man though, for although her surmise was right in regard to Black Mac's being furiously angry at the loss of his gains, yet he was shrewd enough to conceal the fact, and appear to treat the matter with indifference.

It was not his game to seek a quarrel with Dick Talbot at present.

He recognized the fact that the sport was a dangerous man, and although Black Mac was as game a fellow as ever trod the earth, yet his bravery was tempered with a great deal of good, sound, Scotch shrewdness, and in this case he much preferred to have some one else encounter Dick Talbot.

The Tiger of Tucson would take the war-path against him on the morrow, and if the desperado did not succeed in killing Talbot, why, then, there were other schemes which could be tried.

To fight Talbot himself was the last resource, only to be resorted to when all other means had failed.

After the liquid refreshments were disposed of—and there were several rounds, for each man felt called upon to "set 'em up" in turn, the party separated.

Talbot and the landlord went to the hotel, and the Express agent, mayor and marshal marched off in company.

The mayor left when he got to his store, and when the others arrived at the Express office, Broadbent asked the marshal if he wouldn't come in and take a drink as a "night-cap" before going to bed.

MacGregor accepted the invitation.

The pair entered, the Express agent lit a candle, produced the whisky and glasses, and pressed the marshal to be seated.

"You have snug quarters here," the marshal remarked as he helped himself to the whisky.

"Yes, pretty comfortable," and the agent put a good "three fingers" of the fluid into his glass.

"Not much danger of any fellows getting in at you here?"

"Oh, no, there's a stout iron bar on the door in addition to the lock, which is a good one, and the window shutters have strong hooks on the inside."

"What is that you have there over the chimney—a shot-gun?"

"Yes, and as good a one as you will find anywhere around this district!"

"Give me a look at it. I used to be considerable of a shot myself once."

Broadbent rose to get the gun, and the moment he turned his back to the table, the marshal dexterously poured the contents of a small vial, which he had concealed in his hand, into the whisky in the Express agent's glass.

It was done in a second—long before Broadbent returned with the gun.

The fowling-piece was duly examined, then the marshal consulted his watch, expressed his surprise at its being so late, and said he must be off.

So the whisky was drunk and the marshal departed.

The Express agent closed the door after him, put up the bar and made all secure for the night.

Then he became conscious that he was growing exceedingly drowsy.

"The whisky has made me sleepy," he muttered, hardly able to keep his eyes open. He undressed as soon as possible, and in five minutes was fast in slumber's chain.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE RAID.

THE Express-agent had not the least suspicion of the truth—the idea that he had been drugged never entered his head.

He had been drinking freely all through the evening, and when the sleepy fit seized upon him he came to the conclusion that he had drank more whisky than was good for him, and thus accounted for his drowsiness.

It was about twelve o'clock when the marshal departed.

There were a few people in the street as he

proceeded to his cabin, but gradually, as the hours wore on, the stragglers made their way to their homes, and after one o'clock not a soul was to be seen.

The night was dark, no moon, although the stars were out.

About three o'clock, two dark figures came with cautious steps along the street.

They were roughly dressed, with slouch hats pulled well down over their brows, and looked like miners in "hard luck."

But from the peculiar way they were proceeding, any one used to the study of mankind would have immediately concluded that they were not engaged in any honest quest, for they were skulking along as though they were afraid of being seen, yet there was not a soul besides themselves in the street.

The two halted when they came to the Express-office and peered cautiously around them.

"All is serene," remarked the shorter of the two men, speaking with a decidedly English accent.

"Yes, the camp is asleep; there isn't a soul stirring."

"This is the best time for a job of this sort, you know," the other observed.

"It is mighty odd, you know, but people always sleep more soundly between three and four o'clock than they do at any other time."

"So the red-skins believe, and that is generally the time they select for a night attack."

Then, satisfied that they were not observed, the pair stole around to the side of the cabin where the window was situated.

The small man had a short crowbar, about three feet long, and with a point almost as sharp as a chisel.

He inserted the sharp point of the crowbar into the crack where the shutter closed in against the edge of the window, and commenced to pry the shutter open with the skill of a practiced workman.

The shutter was only composed of common pine boards, and had never been designed to resist such a force as was now brought to bear against it.

Gradually it was forced open, the operation being almost noiseless.

When the shutter was open access to the cabin was easy, for there wasn't any fastening on the window.

The casement was raised and the men, stealthy as cats, climbed into the room, taking the precaution to cover their faces with black crape masks before doing so.

Then, after gaining entrance to the cabin, they closed the shutter, so that no chance passer-by would have his suspicion excited.

They stole to the bunk where the Express-agent slumbered, and watched him for a moment.

"It is all right," the tall man observed. "He is sleeping soundly, and now let us take a look at the safe."

The short man produced a dark-lantern from his pocket, lighted it, and proceeded to examine the iron box.

After a careful inspection, the fellow shook his head.

"This is going to be a difficult job," he announced. "This is one of the new safes with all the improvements, and although I think I can get into it, yet I ain't certain, for I haven't got the tools I ought to have, and it will take three or four hours, anyway."

The other shook his head.

"That will not do," he observed. "Three hours brings us to morning, when the camp will be awake, and the Express-agent, too, will be on hand to interfere with us."

"That's the best I can do. You see, gov'nor, I didn't think we would strike a safe like this out in this heathen country. I thought it would be some old iron box affair that we could easily get into."

"The only thing for us to do then is to wake the agent and force him at the muzzle of the pistol to open the safe for us."

"S'pose he cuts up rusty and will not?" the other asked.

"Then we will work him in a way he will despise. But I don't think there is any danger of his trying that game, for he will argue that as there isn't much for him to lose; he might as well open the safe as to provoke us to hurt him by refusing."

"Do you s'pose we can wake him up?"

"Oh, yes; the dose he got was not a large one; only enough to put him to sleep, and the effect of it must be about gone now."

"Be careful, by the way, not to allow him to hear you speak," the big man warned.

"You have a peculiar voice you cannot disguise, and if he heard you talk once he would be apt to recognize you when he met you again."

"All right, gov'nor, I'll be as dumb as an oyster."

"In the first place we must bind his arms so that he will not have any chance to make a fight if he should take it into his head to be ugly."

"That's a good idea," remarked the other.

The big man drew a lariat from his pocket and proceeded to pinion the arms of the sleeper, while the other held the lantern so that he might have light for the operation.

The binding was performed in a skillful manner, and just as the last knot was tied Broadbent opened his eyes.

He looked around him bewildered, his senses being muddled by the drug which had been so deftly administered to him.

"Eh, what the deuce is the meaning of this?" he asked, as he rose to a sitting posture and glared around him.

He was perplexed by the situation in which he found himself, and as his mind was not working with its accustomed clearness he knew not what to make of it.

For answer, the leader of the two intruders whipped out a revolver, and placing the muzzle close to the temple of the Express-agent, said:

"Me and my pard hyer hev jest come to pay you a leetle visit, that is all."

The intruder spoke in a hoarse tone, evidently adopted to disguise his natural voice.

"And if you ar' a sensible man, you won't go to kicking up no fuss which won't do you a mite of good," the man continued.

By this time the dazed feeling had in a measure passed away, and the Express-agent understood what had happened.

"Well, upon my word, this is about the last thing that I expected," he remarked.

"It is jest about the time of year for onlikely things for to happen," the intruder replied.

"Say, how the deuce did you fellows get in?" Broadbent asked, with a perplexed look around, for, as the shutter had been closed again, to all appearance everything was exactly the same as it was when he retired to rest.

"Oh, we came in through the key-hole, and that is the kind of men we are!" the other replied, with a hoarse chuckle.

Then an explanation suddenly occurred to the Express-agent.

"I understand now," he remarked. "I neglected to lock the door."

He didn't say it, but his thought was that he had drank so much whisky as to be incapable of knowing what he was about, for no suspicion entered his mind that there was any foul play about the matter.

"Yes, yes, I reckon that must be the way of it," the intruder assented.

"Well, now, old hoss, we want you to open that safe for us."

"Eh?" amazed was the Express-agent at the cool request.

"Say, don't you understand good United States talk?" the disguised man demanded. "We want you to open that safe, so we kin see what is in it."

"And suppose I don't choose to comply with this modest request of yours?" asked Broadbent.

"Wa-al, if yer don't I shall have to blow the hull top of yer head off!" the rufian replied, and to give due effect to his words, he pressed the cold muzzle of the revolver directly against the temple of the Express-agent.

Now Broadbent was no coward, as men go, neither was he rash enough to rush heedlessly into danger.

He saw that he was in the power of desperate men, and though he fancied that they would not dare to kill him if he refused to open the safe, yet they might do so.

"The report of your pistol would alarm the town, and my murder would quickly be avenged," he said, trying to put on a bold face.

The outlaw chuckled, hoarsely.

"Not much," he said. "Thar's too many pistol-shots fired arter dark in this camp for the town to get alarmed at the sound of one. Our hosses are outside, too, and I reckon we could git away long afore the camp could git hold on us."

This was the truth, and the Express-agent did not attempt to gainsay it.

Then he went on a new tack.

"My friends, if you get into the safe you wouldn't get any plunder to amount to anything. I don't believe there is twenty dollars in the concern. All the money was sent away by to-day's stage."

"Seeing is believing!" responded the intruder, sententiously.

"Open and giv' us a show for our money."

Broadbent was in the toils; there was no escape as far as he could see, so he yielded.

When the safe was opened, the truth of his words became manifest.

There was only fifteen dollars in cash, which the outlaw took, grumbling at the smallness of the amount as he did so.

"This is a nice sort of a safe to crack—thar ain't money enough to buy the drinks for the gang."

"So I told you. If you had come last night, now you would have made a rich haul."

"Ain't no bonds, nor valuable papers?"

"Nary time."

"W'ot are these books?"

"The Express Company's."

"They are valuable, I reckon."

"Oh, no."

"Well, I reckon they are. I bet the Company will come down handsomely to get them back."

Broadbent protested, but the intruders carried off the books, first gagging the agent so he

could not give an alarm and binding him to the bed.

Within an hour, though, he succeeded in freeing himself, and at once proceeded to alarm the mayor.

CHAPTER XXX.

A BOLD DEFIANCE.

It was no easy matter to rouse Mayor White, but the Express-agent finally succeeded in doing so, and his astonishment was great when he learned the particulars of the outrage.

"Better notify the marshal at once," was his counsel.

To the cabin of MacGregor they hurried; soon succeeded in getting him awake, and then related what had occurred.

"By the means of the fellows' horses we may be able to track them," the marshal remarked.

The party proceeded to the Express-office, first providing themselves with lanterns, but the ground was so cut up with tracks in the neighborhood that they were not able to do anything.

"We must wait until morning and have the daylight to aid us," the marshal announced.

The party adjourned to the Express-office, and passed away the time in discussing the matter until morning came.

"The robbery don't really amount to much," Broadbent remarked.

"The fellows only got a few dollars in cash, and the books of an office like this don't amount to anything."

"The cusses thought they could make a stake out of the Company by carrying off the books, but they never made a bigger mistake in their lives, for I don't believe five dollars would be given to regain them."

"All the books are good for is in the case of a dispute in regard to some past transaction, and then it is not the Company who would be likely to be benefited by the production of the books but the customer, so you can bet all you are worth that the Company will not bother their heads to get them back."

When the light was sufficiently strong the party made another examination, but were not able to hit upon the trail of the marauders.

"It is almost impossible amid so many tracks to pick out the right ones," the marshal observed.

"This task would puzzle the best Indian-tracker that ever lifted a trail."

An examination of the cabin, though, showed how the fellows had gained entrance, and the seekers after knowledge were obliged to content themselves with this meager information.

The robbery became the talk of the town when the camp woke up and learned the particulars of the affair, and many were the surmises as to the particular parties who had done the job.

No Man's Camp could boast of as choice a collection of rascals as any town in the wild West, but had been wonderfully free from crimes of this description when it is considered how many scoundrels it held within its borders.

Possibly it was the knowledge that every man went armed, and that if a robber was shot while attempting to enter a cabin, the general opinion would be that it served the man right, was what contributed to this result.

At noon, though, the camp had something else to talk about.

The Tiger of Tucson, having come to the conclusion that the landlord of the hotel had willfully deceived him in regard to Talbot's fighting qualities, in indignation changed his quarters to Bill Donovan's Little Brown Jug Saloon.

Another reason for the change, too, was that Talbot was a guest of the Metropolitan, and it would be awkward for him to reside in the same house with the man whom he intended to challenge to mortal combat.

Johnny Sands was not much of a scholar; as he had often remarked when called upon to handle a pen, he was a deuced sight more used to a howie-knife or a revolver; so it was no easy task for him to draw up the "card" with which he intended to post Dick Talbot in the South-western fashion.

He spoiled a dozen sheets of paper and wasted two hours before he got the thing arranged to his satisfaction.

At last the job was completed, though, and he came forth and nailed the card up on a large tree which stood right in front of the Golden Hairpin Saloon.

The tree-trunk having been partially denuded of its bark by the teeth of marauding horses, had been utilized by the citizens of No Man's Camp for a bulletin-board, whereon "For sale" and kindred notices could be placed.

The Tiger of Tucson's notice was brief and to the point, and he had "printed" it in large letters on a sheet of foolscap, so that "he who runs might read."

It was as follows:

"NOTIS."

"Me, Johnny Sands, the wel-known Tiger of Tucson, hearby publickally post the sharp called Dick Talbot as a skunke an' a liar, and he is my antelop the furst time I gits my eyes onto him."

"JOHNNY SANDS."

Then, after putting up the "notis," the Tiger

of Tucson retired to the neighborhood of the Little Brown Jug Saloon, which was about a couple of hundred paces away, and sat down on a barrel which happened to be standing near the door.

He proposed to wait there until his foe made his appearance.

Within two minutes from the time that the Tiger of Tucson put the notice on the tree there was a crowd collected before it.

The account of how Dick Talbot had "warmed" the Tiger of Tucson had traveled all over the camp, and, of course, like all good stories, it had lost nothing on its journey.

From the ease with which Talbot had succeeded in thrashing the man, and the ridiculous manner in which the job had been performed, most of the citizens had come to the conclusion that the Tiger of Tucson was a fraud, and that like many another boaster who had signaled his entrance into the town by loud vaunts of what a fighter he was, but had speedily met his match and been ignominiously vanquished, he would retreat with as little ceremony as he had appeared.

There were a few in the town though who knew that Johnny Sands was a "good man" and no fraud, and they spoke manfully in his defense.

"He was drunk, maybe, or off his base in some way," they explained, "for he is a wicked fighter, and has been known to stand a dozen men off single-handed. He has fixed many a man for planting since he came into the Tombstone district, and no man ever saw him crawfish yet."

The camp did not exactly know what to make of it, for in the Tiger of Tucson's first appearance as a warrior in No Man's Camp he had scored a complete failure.

"No tenderfoot ever got warmed worse!" was the general declaration, and nine out of every ten men in the camp were willing to go two to one that the town would never hear any more of the Tiger of Tucson.

And so when Johnny Sands posted up his "card," and then sat down upon the barrel, and began to toy with his revolvers while waiting for the appearance of the man whom he had dared to mortal combat, the camp was taken completely by surprise, and great was the speculation existent.

The Tiger of Tucson was a warrior after all; he did "mean business," and there he was on the street, armed to the teeth and ready for his foe.

In about five minutes after the crowd began to gather in front of the tree, the veteran bummer, Joe Bowers, happened to stroll along that way, and seeing the crowd, came up to learn the reason for the gathering.

With great deliberation he read the card aloud.

"Well, now, may I be kicked to death by crippled grasshoppers if this cuss ain't the hardest man to satisfy that I have run across in a month of Sundays."

"He didn't git enuff last night, and is a-hankering arter more to-day."

"Say, feller-citizens, if thar is any of you that has got any money that you are anxious to put up on this hyer Tiger I'm the man who will cover yer dust."

But the offer found no takers. After the scene of last night even the betting plungers of the town were "skeery" of putting their money on Johnny Sands.

"I was afeard so," Joe Bowers declared with a melancholy air and a wise shake of his head; "thar ain't any of you galoots have got the sand to come up and lose yer money like gentlemen."

"Well, so-long, I must git up to the Metropolitan and inform Mister Talbot that thar is a rooster down hyer who is anxious for to be scalped!"

And then Bowers started for the hotel.

With wonderful rapidity the news spread that a messenger had gone to warn Dick Talbot that he had been challenged to mortal combat, and within five minutes quite a crowd had gathered, all anxious to see the fight.

Talbot was in the hotel office reading a newspaper when Bowers entered.

"Mister Talbot, me royal nibs, I have important news for you," the veteran proclaimed.

"What is it?"

"That cuss that you whaled last night, Johnny Sands, the Tiger of Tucson, you know—"

Talbot nodded.

"Well, mighty satrap, he has writ a keerd and stuck it up on a tree down-town, and in the keerd he says you are a skunk and a liar, and challenges you to mortal combat, and to add insult to injury, he has stacked a superfluous e onto to the skunk."

"Do you think the fellow really means business?" Talbot asked, laying aside his newspaper, but spoke with as much unconcern as though it was a common thing to be challenged to a duel to the death.

"Oh, yes, he's waiting for you down in front of the Little Brown Jug Saloon; he has his weapons on, and is going to go for you if he gits a chance."

"Well, I didn't think the fellow would come up to the scratch again after last night, but some men are hard to satisfy, and it takes all sorts of humans to make a world," Talbot observed, with the air of philosopher, as he rose to his feet.

"They say he is really a bad man, me noble duke," Bowers observed. "I heard some galoots in the crowd a-chinning, and they said he has laid out a good many men in his time. I tried to get some of the fellers to back up this say-so with the solid stuff, but they wouldn't have it," and the veteran heaved a sigh of regret.

Just at this point the landlord bustled in, all out of breath in his haste to tell his guest the news.

"It's all O. K.! He knows it, and is going to fix that cuss for planting—git yer carriages ready!" Joe Bowers exclaimed, before the landlord could speak.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE TWO GIRLS.

"Oh, you know all about it, then?" exclaimed the landlord, quite disappointed that he had not been the first to bring the news.

"Yes, sir-ee, you are away behind the lighter," Bowers answered.

"After that little affair last night I did not think I should hear any more of this Tiger of Tucson," Dick Talbot remarked, examining his revolvers as he spoke, so as to make sure they were in working order and properly loaded.

"Well, from all I can learn, Mr. Talbot, this Johnny Sands is really a dangerous fellow, though one would not be apt to think so after that holy show you made of him last night. He was run out of Tombstone by the sheriff, who didn't dare to arrest him alone and raised a posse to help him."

"The fellow, in a street fight, had laid out three men, and one of them was the marshal of the town."

"When the sheriff and his posse got after him he lit out, but they were better mounted than he, and after a long chase, they run him to cover; in the fight that followed, the sheriff's party lost two or three men—accounts differed in regard to that, but the Tiger stood them off, and they were glad to retreat and let him go on his way in peace."

"He's a hoss, now, I tell yer!" the veteran said.

"I suppose the poor show he made last night can be accounted for, even though the man is game enough," Talbot remarked.

"In the first place I took him by surprise, and after I had once got my grip on him, being much the stronger man, he was helpless in my hands."

"Possibly, too, he is one of those men who never depend upon the weapons which nature has given them."

"I have met with such fellows before; take their knives and pistols away, they are rendered helpless, and, if you remember, I shook all the weapons out of this fellow's possession before I put him out of the saloon."

"Yes, I know," the landlord assented. "And he was all used up too from the rough handling which he received from you, and I doubt if he would have been in any condition to make a fight after you got through with him even if he had weapons."

"Well, the man has chosen his battle-field, and, of course is armed with the weapons he prefers, so he ought to be able to make a good show to-day, if he is anything of a warrior."

"No doubt about that."

"How do your folks here regard a little affair of this sort?" Talbot asked. "I don't suppose there is any objection to a little picnic of this kind, provided the fight is a fair one."

"Oh, no, that is all right; in fact, I think our citizens would be more apt to chip in and raise a purse to be given to the victor than to throw any obstacles in the way," the landlord replied.

This statement excited the admiration of the veteran bummer at once.

"Well, now, it does me proud to live in a camp like this, where the men are all white, clear through, and can appreciate a little fun when they see it," he declared.

"I must be going, for it would be a shame to keep this gentleman waiting," Talbot remarked, as he started for the street.

While this conversation had been going on, another one in regard to the matter had occurred in the marshal's office.

Mayor White had hurried in and surprised the marshal with the intelligence that Dick Talbot had been "posted" by the Tiger of Tucson, and all the camp was on the alert in anticipation of a fight.

"Johnny Sands is sitting outside of the Little Brown Jug Saloon, fully armed, waiting for Talbot to make his appearance on the street," the mayor said in conclusion.

"But is Talbot in town?"

"Yes; I saw him sitting in the hotel-office as I passed by just now, and that fat, greasy fellow who follows him around was talking to him—telling about the card, I suspect."

"We will have a circus then, mighty soon!" exclaimed the marshal, jumping to his feet.

"You think that Talbot will go for him?"

"Oh, yes, no doubt; he's not the man to take a bluff of this kind with impunity."

"If Johnny Sands lays him out, you will not stand any chance to get back the money that the sport skinned you out of at poker," White suggested.

"I can afford to lose that if this sport is done for; unless he is either killed or driven out of the camp I fear he will cost both of us a heap of money."

"That's so; that's so!" the mayor assented, and the two repaired to the open air.

The street was full of people, collected in little groups here and there, and all were eagerly discussing the chances of the coming fight, for that the sport, Dick Talbot, would promptly take up the defiance of the stranger, no one doubted.

As it happened, Diantha Maxwell had come to the center of the camp that morning to get some things from the store, and after completing her purchases, her wonder was excited by the number of people in the street, who had gathered there while she had been in the store.

She looked around to discover the cause; she saw that the people were all gaping at the rakish-looking stranger who was amusing himself with polishing his revolvers on his buckskin shirt, but scouts, such as he appeared to be, were not uncommon objects in the camp, and she wondered at the attention that the man was evidently exciting.

The placard on the tree did not happen to meet her notice, although there was a little crowd of people gaping at it.

She was just in front of the Golden Hairpin Saloon when she slackened her pace, trying to discover why the people had gathered in the street.

At the last window in the saloon, which was open, stood the presiding genius of the place, 'Frisco Nell.

The eyes of the two girls met, Nell's cold and inquiring, as much as to say: "I wonder if you care to notice me in public, and you need not do so unless you want to?"

But Diantha had rather taken a fancy to the faro queen, despite the fact that many in the camp were disposed to speak evil of her.

She did not believe that the girl was half as bad as people tried to make her out, for the fact that her brother had been anxious to make her his wife caused Diantha to think that the girl was wronged by the idle gossip of the town.

And holding this belief, she was not ashamed to acknowledge the faro queen as an acquaintance before all the lookers-on.

She smiled and bowed.

'Frisco Nell's cold features relaxed immediately, for in her heart she cherished a kindly feeling toward the girl—the sister of the man who had honored her with his love, which she appreciated, although she could not bring herself to accept it.

She smiled and returned the bow.

Diantha advanced to 'Frisco Nell and offered her hand in the frankest manner.

"It is a pleasant day, isn't it?" she said, as a beginning to the conversation.

"Yes, it is," replied 'Frisco Nell, returning the pressure warmly.

"Do you know my curiosity has been excited by all these people in the street?" Diantha said.

"What are they doing here, and why do they gaze at that ruffianly-looking fellow in the buckskin suit?"

"Is it possible that you don't know?" exclaimed 'Frisco Nell, amazed.

"Indeed, I do not. I should imagine that something important was about to take place, but for the life of me I cannot imagine what it is."

"Didn't you read the card on the tree there?"

"Where the people are standing?"

"Yes, but perhaps you cannot make it out at this distance."

"Oh, I think I can read it; I am generally very far-sighted."

And then the girl turned her brilliant eyes upon the Tiger of Tucson's proclamation.

A few moments sufficed to make her acquainted with the contents of the card, and a flush of indignation crimsoned her face.

"Why, this is a dreadful outrage!" she exclaimed. "The idea of putting such a thing as that up in a public place—some one ought to tear it down."

"That would probably be a hazardous undertaking," 'Frisco Nell observed.

"Why so?"

"Because the man that put it up is on the watch, and if any one should attempt to meddle with the card he would undoubtedly attack him."

"Isn't it perfectly dreadful?" Diantha exclaimed.

"Yes, such a thing is common though in wild and lawless camps like this one."

Then a sudden idea occurred to Diantha.

"That man yonder, sitting on the barrel, with the revolver, is this Tiger of Tucson?"

"Yes, that is Johnny Sands."

"And why does he abuse Mr. Talbot in this public manner?"

"I suppose you are not well enough acquaint-

ed with the wild West to understand about men like this Tiger of Tucson," 'Frisco Nell remarked.

"He is a bully and desperado—travels on the reputation that he has of killing men who dare to cross his path. He is a stranger here, and in order to let the camp see that he was a great fighting man, he picked a quarrel last night with Mr. Talbot in this saloon, and got soundly thrashed for his pains."

"Oh, that was good!" cried Diantha, excited by the story.

"And now, to-day, having armed himself, he seeks for vengeance."

"Will there be a fight then between this ruffian and Mr. Talbot?" asked the girl, evidently anxious.

"Undoubtedly; by this time Mr. Talbot has probably been warned that this desperado is waiting for him, and he may come at any moment."

"Oh, this is dreadful!" Diantha murmured, turning pale.

'Frisco Nell watched her with envious eyes.

"You are growing faint—come inside and let me give you a glass of water. There is a private side-door at the end of the building, and this is not the saloon, but my private apartment."

A faint spell was coming over the girl, and she gladly accepted the offer so kindly made.

'Frisco Nell brought her a chair, which she placed by the window, and a glass of water.

Diantha took the seat, and the beverage refreshed her.

"Ah, here comes Mr. Talbot!" 'Frisco Nell exclaimed. "Now, then, this bully will get a lesson which will be apt to last him for a time!"

Diantha grew pale as death.

"But if Mr. Talbot should be killed!" she exclaimed.

"Don't fear! He will not be!" cried 'Frisco Nell.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE STREET FIGHT.

It was true—the keen eyes of 'Frisco Nell had not deceived her. Dick Talbot was advancing up the street.

The hum of conversation rose on the air the moment he made his appearance in the doorway of the hotel.

"There he is!"

"Where?"

"Hyer he comes!"

"Is that him?"

"Yes, that fellow with the frilled shirt. Ain't he a sport from Sportville?"

"Look out for some good place to see the shootin' match whar we won't be in danger of gitting hit!"

A wise suggestion this, when it is considered that in the majority of street fights of this kind the bystanders generally stand more chance of stopping a bullet than the principals in the affair.

With the speed of the telegraph the announcement that Talbot was coming spread up the street, until it reached the knot of citizens congregated near where the Tiger of Tucson sat on the barrel, and one of these took upon himself the office of communicating the intelligence to the desperado.

"Keep yer eyes peeled, Johnny Sands! yer meat is coming!"

The Tiger of Tucson nodded, and a sardonic smile crept over his hard features.

He got down from the barrel; cocked first one revolver and then the other with an ostentatious air; then he slowly sauntered out into the middle of the street.

"See his game!" cried one of the miners, highly excited over the affair. "He's going out into the middle of the street so that Talbot won't have any chance to line him in with a post or anything of that kind."

"Oh, he's an old hand at the business, you bet!" exclaimed another.

Despite the fact that the Tiger of Tucson had posted his foe, daring him to mortal combat, and then sat down to await his coming, public opinion ran considerably to the belief that it was all a piece of bluff on the part of the challenger.

He had made so bad a show on the occasion of his first appearance as a fighter that few people in the camp could bring themselves to believe he amounted to anything in that line.

In fact, when the news went around that the Tiger of Tucson had "posted" Dick Talbot, a large number of the miners had immediately jumped to the conclusion that Talbot had been called suddenly out of town, and the new-comer, knowing this, had taken advantage of his absence to gain a little cheap fame.

When Talbot's coming was heralded, and the Tiger of Tucson, instead of showing the white feather, as many had predicted, got his weapons in order and stepped boldly forth to meet his antagonist, public opinion suddenly changed.

The new-comer was a man of sand, after all, and had grit enough to back his game.

"He's no flint-fighter, but I reckon he's a hoss with we'pons!" was the exclamation passed from mouth to mouth.

Talbot, coming slowly along on the sidewalk, caught sight of the Tiger of Tucson, when he took up his position in the center of the street, and he immediately followed his example, drawing his revolvers from their holsters as he did so.

And now the principals were in the middle of the street, the bystanders, in by the houses, had a good view, and though it would appear from the position of the men that their bullets would not be likely to go so wide of the mark as to inflict wounds upon any of the people upon the sidewalks, yet the lookers-on were not satisfied to take this view of it, and as Talbot advanced in his leisurely way upon the red-haired desperado, the anxious spectators began to scatter.

They sought refuge in doorways, behind trees and hitching-posts, and old boxes and barrels by the side of the stores.

They took considerable stock in the old bowling alley joke.

"If you don't want to get hit by the ball, stand in among the pins!"

A hush like the silence of a funeral had fallen upon the crowd, only broken now and then by an occasional whisper, as some inveterate gamester endeavored to entice his neighbor to gamble upon the result of the fight.

"I'll go you ten to six that Talbot cleans the red-haired rooster out inside of ten minutes."

This about represented the state of the betting, but there was very little money staked upon the fight, a fact which the veteran bummer, Joe Bowers, loudly lamented.

"You No Man's Camp galoots ain't got sand enuff to blind a one-eyed moole!" he declared.

"Wot sort of a town do you call this, anyway, whar a man can't get anybody to back a rooster who goes 'round with sich a name as the Tiger of Tucson?"

But as Talbot had shown that he was a fighter, and Johnny had not given any evidence that his claim to fame was as great as report gave out, the miners were not inclined to risk their dust.

When Talbot got within a hundred yards of Johnny Sands he halted.

A fairer field for a fight could not be wished, for the street was about sixty feet wide in the clear, with no obstacle to stop a bullet.

Face to face stood the opponents, the tree upon which the card of defiance was tacked being about midway between the two.

"Are you the man who has posted me—Johnny Sands, the Tiger of Tucson?" Talbot asked.

"You bet yer boots I am!" the desperado cried, arrogantly.

"And I am the cuss who is jest going to lay you out and fit you for a pine coffin too!" he added.

"You are one of the gentlemen, I presume, who keep a private graveyard, so as to always have ample accommodation for the braves you slay," Talbot remarked with elaborate politeness.

"Wa-al, I reckon I will fit you for a graveyard afore we git through this heat, whether I own one or not!" the Tiger of Tucson retorted.

"You can't most generally, usually always tell who is governor until after election," Talbot rejoined.

"By-the-by, in case you should happen to get plugged in this little affair where would you prefer to be planted?"

"Is there any particular spot which you would like to occupy, if you will be kind enough to explain to me now where it is, I shall take great pleasure in putting you there if it is in my power."

"I will see you planted in good style, of course; that is a point upon which I am particular, and if you don't leave funds enough to fix the funeral up in first-class Eastern style, I will be pleased to chip in to raise a subscription, and you need not worry at all about it, for this is a public-spirited camp, and there is no doubt the money will be forthcoming."

"If you can fight half as well as you kin chin you ought to be able to whip your weight in wild-cats?" the Tiger of Tucson sneered.

"Well, I can," Talbot replied. "I am death on all kinds of cats, tigers included!"

"Ah, shut yer mouth and come up to the scratch!" the desperado exclaimed.

He was getting impatient, his nerves were strung to their highest tension, and the strain was beginning to be too much for him.

And this was Talbot's game.

While he was talking he was taking the measure of his man and speculating as to the mode of fighting which he would be likely to adopt.

Talbot himself—a man of ice and iron, with nerves as firm as rock—was always cool and collected, and no amount of badinage could disturb him in the least, but if his opponent was a "rush" fighter, a man who depended upon a sudden dash to carry him to victory, then a delay at the beginning of the struggle, and an exciting exchange of words, would be apt to interfere materially with his exercising his accustomed skill.

In this case it had worked just as Talbot expected.

The Tiger of Tucson had become angry and

excited, and in such a condition a man is never able to do his best.

"Come up to the scratch yourself!" Talbot exclaimed. "I have advanced fully thirty feet while I have been talking, and you have not advanced a foot."

"In fact, I think you have been going backward—getting ready to run, I suppose, the moment I commence hostilities!"

The taunt inflamed the Tiger of Tucson still more, and he became fairly red in the face with rage.

"You durned galoot, I'll soon show you who is going to run!" he yelled, and he started forward at a brisk pace.

In each hand he carried a revolver, ready cocked for action.

Talbot also had his revolvers out, one in each hand, and their hammers were also raised, although they were double-acting tools, self-cockers.

But although these self-cocking revolvers are extremely handy when a man is engaged in a struggle where it is necessary for him to discharge his weapons as rapidly as possible, and a fighter armed with such a tool has a decided advantage over an antagonist who is obliged to cock his pistol each time before it can be discharged, yet, among practical men, there is a belief that the use of a self-cocker interferes with the accuracy of a man's shooting.

The working of the double-action is apt to throw the pistol a trifle to one side, and so spoil the aim.

Talbot believed that there was something in this theory, and so, when obliged to use the tool rapidly, always made allowances for this side movement, but when engaged in a regular duel of this kind he cocked the pistols just as if they were not self-acting.

Talbot held his pistols at the level of his waist, but when the Tiger of Tucson got within a hundred feet he raised them rapidly and took aim as though to fire.

The ruse succeeded; his opponent, fearful of being shot before he could fire, discharged his weapons immediately, hardly tarrying to take aim.

Both bullets went wide of the mark, and one of them—the one from the pistol in the left hand of the Tiger of Tucson—came so near a group of miners "corraled" behind a couple of barrels on the end of the sidewalk, in front of the Golden Hairpin Saloon, as to cause them to beat a retreat around the corner of the building in an extremely hasty manner.

At any other time such a thing would cause a roar of laughter, but the spectators were too interested in the fight to pay any attention to any side issues.

To the astonishment of Johnny Sands, Talbot did not fire.

The Tiger of Tucson had halted when he discharged his weapons.

Talbot dropped his hands to the level of his waist again and laughed in the face of his foe.

"Oh, come, come, Tiger, you will have to do better than that, you know!" Talbot exclaimed.

"That is no kind of marksmanship; folks will be apt to say that you cannot hit the side of a house."

Talbot was advancing slowly while he was speaking, and when he finished his remarks, with a rapid motion he took aim at his antagonist.

Again was the desperado fooled.

He had been watching Talbot—suspected that he was trying to get near enough to secure a good shot, and as Talbot was now only some sixty feet off the supposition seemed reasonable, so, when Talbot raised his weapon to the level, again Johnny Sands blazed away with both pistols, the action being forced upon him so abruptly that he had no time to dwell on his aim.

The result was that Talbot escaped injury, although one of the bullets whistled within a couple of inches of his head—a good line shot, but too high.

"I must put a stop to this foolishness," Talbot muttered, "or this fellow will be winging me. I reckon he is a pretty fair shot if I gave him time to dwell a bit on his aim."

While these words were passing Talbot's lips, the Tiger of Tucson was recocking his pistols, and cursing his own foolishness at being thus easily tricked.

Talbot drew a "bead" on his man with his right-hand revolver and fired.

The report startled Johnny Sands, and instinctively he raised his hand-revolvers to return the fire.

The action spoiled Dick Talbot's careful aim, for the bullet struck Sands in the right hand, and glancing upward entered his shoulder.

With a howl of mingled rage and pain, the Tiger of Tucson dropped the revolver, and staggered backward.

"He's hit—he's hit!" came from twenty voices—the spectators watching the scene with almost breathless interest.

Talbot saw that his bullet had missed the mark for which it had been aimed, and hastened to recock his revolver again, although he did not think that the desperado would want any more.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A SOLEMN VOW.

JOHNNY SANDS, though, on this occasion, seemed determined to show the men of No Man's Camp that he was worthy of his name, the Tiger!

"I am not settled yet!" he cried, "although my right hand is done for, but I kin shoot as well with the left as I kin with the right, and I'll lay you out yet, if you will give me time to tie a handkerchief around my hand."

"Take all the time you want, sir," responded Talbot, with a polite bow.

"My time is yours, and you had better have assistance in binding up your hand."

"Leave it to me!" exclaimed the O'Donohue, at this point, making his appearance from behind the tree upon which the placard had been placed.

The doctor was on his way to see a patient when the duel was sprung upon the camp, and so happened to have a roll of bandages in his pocket which came very handy into play.

The deft fingers of the Irishman soon put the hand in shape, and, although the pain was intense, as was also that proceeding from the wound in the shoulder, though not severe, the desperado bore it manfully.

"Me fri'nd; if you will be afther taking my advice, ye'll have no more of this business. It's a bad hand ye have there, and if ye are not careful you may lose the use of that same altogether."

"I will have another go at this fellow if I die for it!" the desperado declared.

"They say that if a man has his own way he will live longer, but, upon me soul, in this case it seems to me that your having your own way will be likely to be the death of ye!" and with this philosophical remark the Irishman retreated to his former position behind the tree.

"Now, then, I am ready for you ag'in!" the Tiger of Tucson cried, defiantly.

"I am your humble servant to command!" Talbot replied. "Go ahead as soon as you like."

Talbot had little fear of his opponent now. There is hardly one man in a thousand, even among practiced marksmen, who is a good left-hand shot.

Talbot himself was one, but then he was a "two-handed man," and could do almost everything as well with his left hand as with the right; but in all his vast experience in the wilds of the West he had not met many men who could, with justice, be called expert left-handed marksmen.

That his antagonist was not one of these gifted men was evident from the exhibition he had already given in this line, so Talbot was easy now in regard to the result of the fight.

The Tiger of Tucson raised his pistol and took careful aim.

Talbot saw that he was determined to dwell on the shot until he felt sure that he could send the bullet true to the mark, and he repeated the movement which had already twice succeeded.

The desperado smiled grimly; he was not to be caught napping a third time, and so he paid no attention to it.

This was exactly what Talbot expected, and this time he fired a snap shot, seemingly without taking the trouble to take aim, before the desperado could discharge his weapon.

Again a howl came from the lips of Johnny Sands—he was hit a second time.

The pistol fell from his hand, he staggered back and fell sideways to the earth.

The fight was done.

O'Donohue sprung to the assistance of the wounded man, followed by a crowd of the spectators, while another knot collected around Talbot to congratulate him upon his victory.

Again had accident favored the desperado. He was not seriously hurt, for the bullet had struck a rib and passed around to the side.

"He is worth a dozen dead men yet, do ye mind?" the doctor declared, after ascertaining the nature of the wound.

The mayor directed that the Tiger be carried to his hotel, saying that as he didn't seem to have any friends, he supposed he would have to look out for him, for the man could not be allowed to suffer for want of attention.

The marshal had suggested this course to the official, not wishing to appear in the matter himself.

Dick Talbot was a hero now, naturally, and it was as much as he could do to get away from the attentions which the miners wished to lavish upon him, and, as usual, Bowers came to the rescue.

"He ain't much on the drinking, feller-citizens!" he declared, "but I am! I am not a hard drinker—the man wot says so insults the woman I board with. I deny the allegation and defy the alligator! I drink as easily as any man who walks on top of this hyer foot-stool."

"If you doubt it, try me! Get me drunk and have some fun with me!"

And the crowd accepted the situation, thus placing Bowers in his glory, and the yarns he told about the wondrous deeds of Dick Talbot and other pards of his in on the Pacific Slope were enough to make the author of "Baron

Munchausen" turn in his quiet grave with envy. There was a brief consultation between the two girls after the fight had ended.

"Isn't it dreadful?" Diantha observed.

"Yes, but men will be brutes sometimes, and women, too, also."

"I do not think Mr. Talbot was to blame, though," Miss Maxwell observed. "As far as I could see, the desperado provoked the quarrel, and Mr. Talbot had to protect himself."

A quiet smile appeared on Frisco Nell's face.

"Yes, you are right. He was not to blame; there wasn't any other course open to him but to fight, and, by the way, I must take occasion to tell him that he had your sympathies in his encounter."

Diantha crimsoned to the temples.

"Oh, no, don't do that for the world! I wouldn't like him to know it. Well, good-by, I must be going," and she rose to her feet.

"Why don't you come up and see me some time?"

"Would you like me to call on you?" Frisco Nell asked, a strange look on her dark face.

"Why, of course, or I should not ask you. Oh, I am honest, and do not say what I do not mean. I do not believe what people say of you and I do not care. I know that my unfortunate brother loved you, and I would like to love you, too, if you will let me."

Impulsively Frisco Nell folded her arms around Diantha and drew her to her heart, while the lips of the two beautiful girls met in a long, lingering kiss.

"There, we are sisters now in truth!" Diantha whispered.

"Yes, and if I can serve you, command me even to the risk of my life!"

A few more words and they parted.

"She has fallen in love with Talbot, that is plain," Frisco Nell observed, musingly, as she resumed her seat and fell to meditating.

"I do not wonder at it, for he is a man calculated to win a woman's heart."

"I ought to know, for he has made an impression upon mine, and I thought that all the love in my nature was dead and gone long ago, never to return."

"Does he fancy her, though? He must if he has any eyes in his head for a beautiful girl."

"I must continue to bring them together. I can soon see whether he will care for her or not, and if he does not, why then I stand a chance; but if he falls in love with her, I will do all I can to bring about their union, and will be a faithful, loyal sister to them both."

The vow was deeply sworn, and the girl was one of those resolute natures which would keep such an oath even at the risk of a broken heart.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A DECIDED ANSWER.

AFTER Diantha reached the street the marshal chanced to catch sight of her and he immediately came up.

Black Mac had not noticed where she came from, and he had no suspicion that she had been the guest of the mistress of the Golden Hairpin.

His supposition was that she had come from one of the stores.

"We have had quite an exciting time," he remarked, as he joined her and walked by her side.

"Yes; but I suppose in a mining-camp of this kind such things cannot be avoided."

"Oh, no; men's angry passions will rise, and then they resort to arms."

"By the way, I was coming up to see you today, and as I have met you I suppose I had better go along now."

"Yes; I should think so."

"I have about completed my examination of your brother's affairs, and the deeper I get into the matter the worse the outlook becomes. As far as I can make out, your brother was not only almost penniless when he died, but also heavily in debt."

"Is it possible?" Diantha exclaimed.

"Yes; that is the only conclusion I have been able to reach after an extremely careful examination."

"I do not understand it," the girl observed, with a puzzled air.

"Donald always spoke as though he was doing excellently. I have been thinking over various conversations that we have had, and I have been able to recall two or three instances when he distinctly told me that he was making a fortune out of the mine, and said that in a year or so he would have made money enough to enable him to sell the Heather Bell property and retire to the East, where he could engage in some business which would be much more congenial to him than mining."

"Yes, yes; I can easily explain what he was thinking about," the marshal said, immediately.

"I can understand his little game, for I have been in the same box myself," he continued.

"He always gave every one the impression that the mine was panning out well, and his workmen were all close-mouthed, discreet fellows who had sense enough not to babble in regard to their employer's business, so the impression around town was that when your brother

got hold of the Heather Bell property he struck a mighty rich thing."

"Yes, I know that the mine was considered to be worth a great deal of money, for some gentleman called on him one day in regard to buying the property, and they offered forty-five thousand dollars in cash for it."

"I am perfectly sure of this, for the offer was made in my presence, and they had a check for the money all ready to close the bargain."

"And your brother would not accept?"

"No, he said the property was worth fifty thousand dollars, and that was the lowest figure he would be willing to take for it."

"Of course, I can see his game clearly enough; the men departed and told all over town that Donald Maxwell had struck a big thing, and that nothing less than fifty thousand dollars would lift his interest."

"Yes, I suppose so."

"Don't you see what your brother was driving at?"

"Indeed I do not."

"Why, he was playing a big game of bluff, as they say out West here," the marshal exclaimed in the most positive manner.

"He refused forty-five because he felt sure that by holding on he could get fifty. It was an easy way to corral five thousand dollars."

"In reality the mine was not paying him—there was no money in it. He was getting enough out of it to pay running expenses and a living for himself, but no profit, but by putting on a bold face and talking loudly about how well the mine was doing he stood a chance to stick some fellows, with more money than brains, with the property."

"That game is played every day."

The honest soul of the girl was inexpressibly shocked by this assertion.

"Oh, no, it is not possible!" she exclaimed in horrified amazement.

"That would be as bad as stealing! Donald had his faults, I know, but he would never stoop to do anything of that kind, for he was an honest man."

"Oh, well, that is not considered dishonest, you know," Black Mac explained.

"It is done every day in all mining regions. A man does not lie about the matter; he merely says his mine is a good one, and he wants so much money for it; and mines are so uncertain, you see, that the wisest man can never tell how long they will last or how turn out."

"Oh, I know Donald would never lend himself to any deception of that kind!" the girl exclaimed, positively.

"I am only a woman, Mr. MacGregor, without any experience in business matters, and therefore cannot be expected to know much about such things, but this I am sure, whoever gets money by any such device as this of which you speak is a rogue and a rascal, and I am certain that all honest people will think as I do."

MacGregor had wit enough to see that the girl was deeply in earnest in the matter, and that if he attempted to defend any such sharp practice he most surely would injure himself in her opinion.

"Well, I don't really suppose it is just what would be called right in the East, but it is such a common occurrence out here that men have got to thinking that it is all correct."

"Yes, but it is not, and no amount of special pleading will make it so."

"Very true, and that is what bothers me about your brother's case. He is the last man in the world whom I would have supposed would try such a thing."

"Oh, I am sure of it!"

"But if he was not up to some game of the kind, what explanation can be given?" the marshal asked, with an innocent air.

"I don't know—I don't understand it at all!" Diantha exclaimed, woefully distressed.

"It is very strange!" and MacGregor shook his head as though he was as much perplexed as the girl.

"Yes, it is! Why, do you know, I dream of it at night, and all sorts of strange fancies come to me in my visions."

"It seems to me sometimes, when I brood over the matter in my lonely hours, that there is some dark mystery connected with it."

"Why was poor Donald killed?—he had no enemies—why should his life be taken?"

"My idea was that this sport, Talbot, was responsible for his death. Your brother's dying words would seem to indicate that he and the sport were acquainted—that there had been enmity between them and that he expected to be hunted to death by him."

"Oh, no, I am sure that is not so. I have been with my brother constantly ever since we came from Scotland, and then from the East we came directly to this camp. There was never an opportunity for him to meet the man, and if they had met, I am sure I would have known of it."

"You must not be so sure of that; brothers have secrets sometimes which they do not confide to their sisters."

"But to return to Donald's affairs. I find that he has only paid the earnest-money on the

Heather Bell property—just a single hundred dollars—and there are nine hundred still due."

"Then I questioned the Express agent as to whether your brother had any sums of money deposited with the Express company."

"Broadbent—Alex Broadbent is the Express agent, you know—said he had a poor memory for anything of that kind, as all such business was put down in the books and he did not trouble his head with the details, but it was his impression that your brother had not sent anything away recently, but the books would tell; and now, last night the books were stolen from the Express office, so that it is not possible to gain any information from them, and from inquiry I find that even if your brother had money deposited with the Express company, without the receipts can be produced, or these books recovered, there is no chance of getting a cent of it."

"How strange it is!" Diantha exclaimed. "I heard the story of the robbery of the Express office in the store, and from the description given of the men I am inclined to think it is the same two who robbed my house."

"Well, as far as that goes, I suppose all these masked robbers look pretty much alike," the marshal observed.

"But is it not strange that the robbery of the Express office should also have a direct connection with my brother's estate?"

"Well—yes, but that is one of those coincidences which are continually happening," Black Mac observed, slowly.

"And I have been thinking over the visit of the masked men to my cabin, and I have almost come to the conclusion that they did find the true hiding-place as well as the decoy one," the girl remarked.

"What gives you that impression?"

A close observer would have detected that the marshal was a little annoyed at something, but the girl, deeply interested in relating her ideas, did not notice that there was any change in her companion's manner.

"From the fact that some important papers are missing which I am sure were in that hiding-place."

"Ah, indeed!"

"Yes, you can judge how important it is when I say it is my Donald's monthly balance-sheet."

"Oh, I was not aware that he had such a thing."

"Oh, yes, it was his custom at the end of every month to put down on a sheet of paper all his expenses and receipts, and then balance the two, so as to see how he was getting along."

"A very excellent idea," the marshal commented.

"I don't know how it was that I did not think to tell you about the important papers right at the beginning, but I suppose it was because the shock of the tragedy affected my head so that for a time I was really not like myself."

"Very natural under the circumstances."

"Yes, there should be a balance-sheet for every month since Donald took possession of the mine, and yet there is not one, and that makes me think the masked men did find the secret hiding-place, and if they took the balance sheets—as I am sure they did—no doubt there were other valuable papers stolen by them, too."

"I really think you are on a false scent here," the marshal observed. "Still, you may be right; it is a very mysterious affair."

By this time they had reached the mine, and at Diantha's invitation MacGregor entered the cabin.

After the two were seated the conversation was resumed.

"The mine will have to go back to Mayor White, and I must get new quarters for you somewhere," the marshal announced.

"I was in hopes I should be able to save something for you out of the wreck, but it will not be possible."

"Ah, Diantha, if you could only bring yourself to look with a favorable eye upon my suit, then I could take care of you for the rest of your life."

The girl grew red and then white, then red and white again, as her color came and went; evidently she was terribly embarrassed, and as the marshal had never seen her so before he took it for a bad omen.

It was.

Hesitatingly, Diantha explained that she had given the matter deep and earnest thought, and had finally come to the conclusion that she would never be able to love him as a wife ought to love her husband.

Concealing his disappointment as well as possible, MacGregor endeavored to persuade her to take more time to consider the matter, but she was firm, and at last he took his departure, evidently very much out of sorts.

When he was gone the girl rose and paced the floor, trembling with agitation.

"Now, then, I feel as if I was utterly alone!" she exclaimed.

"In the future, after this repulse, I cannot expect anything from him."

"And I have not made any mistake, either, in declining to become his wife," she continued. "My heart tells me so!"

"It really seems as though a veil had been suddenly torn away from before my eyes!"

"His wife—no, no! the thought is misery!"

"And now the suspicion comes that it is possible that he has not done as much as he might to solve this dark mystery."

"I must have other help."

"Frisco Nell! Yes, she said she would be glad to serve me, even at the risk of life. I will see and confide my story to her to-morrow."

"Ah! if I only had some man like this Richard Talbot to fight my battle!"

And in her dreams that night the face of bold Injun Dick was ever before her.

CHAPTER XXXV.

A LIBERAL OFFER.

"I HAVE come upon unpleasant business, Miss Maxwell," Mayor White observed when he called upon Diantha the morning which succeeded the day on which the events related in our last chapter took place.

"I regret it exceedingly, but business, you know."

"Certainly, sir, pray be seated."

The mayor accepted the chair and at once proceeded to explain.

"I sold this mine to your brother for a thousand dollars, to be paid in ten payments of a hundred each, a hundred down and the rest when he felt like it within the term of one year, with the promise that if the whole thousand was not paid inside of the year the mine was to be returned to me on demand without putting me to the trouble of any legal process."

"Here is the contract!"

And Mayor White handed the document to the girl.

She read the paper and saw that the agreement was as he had said.

"You will see that the year expired, yesterday, and so I have called upon you, as your brother's legal representative, to see what you are going to do about the matter."

"Of course I don't suppose that a young lady like yourself knows much of anything about business, so I will explain the matter to you," the mayor continued.

"There was nine hundred dollars to be paid by twelve o'clock yesterday, or else the mine comes back to me."

"Yes, I see; of course I understand that; the agreement is perfectly clear."

"Well, all you have to do is to pay me the money, I give you a receipt and the property is yours."

"But I haven't nine hundred dollars!" Diantha exclaimed.

"Well, of course, I will admit that I expected that, for I knew that your brother's affairs were in a bad way."

"It is an open secret between us sharps, who are posted, that the mine isn't worth anything like what it is supposed to be worth, and that if your unfortunate brother had continued to unload it at a big figure he would have been very lucky."

"That is what I meant by saying that my business was of an unpleasant nature. It is not pleasant to tell anybody, much less a lady like yourself, that they are in a hole."

"But you have one good friend in this town who will not see you suffer and that is Marshal MacGregor."

"To save you he is willing to dip into a risky speculation."

"Just you sign this paper wherein you transfer your interest in the Heather Bell property to him," and the mayor unfolded the document, spreading it out on the table, "and he will pay me my money and I am instructed to give you my check for a thousand dollars so you will feel a little independent."

"Yes, but my brother was once offered forty-five thousand dollars for the property!" Diantha exclaimed.

Although she didn't understand much about business, yet it seemed altogether wrong to her to part with a property for about two thousand dollars for which forty-five had been offered.

"Yes, but that was three or four months ago when this mine got a boom on the strength of getting ore which really never came from the property."

"You couldn't get forty-five hundred now from anybody, much less thousands."

"But it does not seem possible to me that the mine could have so depreciated in value."

"My dear girl, mines are up to day, down to-morrow, and vice versa."

"Really, under the terms of this agreement, your interest in the mine expired yesterday, for then the money ought to have been paid."

"But in order to oblige the marshal, who desires to do you a service, I consented not to press my claim, in order to give you a chance to corral a thousand out of it."

"You can judge how much I think the property is worth when I am willing in place of taking it myself, which I have a perfect right to do, to accept the face of my claim, nine hundred dollars for it."

"I reckon I am just as anxious to get the dollars, my dear Miss Maxwell, as anybody, and you can rest assured I would not let this

property slip through my fingers if I thought it was worth more than my claim."

"Yes, so I would suppose."

"Oh, there's no doubt at all about it. I am out in this western country to make money and I am not going to miss any chances."

"In this case I had rather have my nine hundred dollars than the Heather Bell property, and I do not really see how I can assert my opinion in regard to the value of the mine in a stronger way."

"Money makes the mare go, you know, and in a matter of this kind money talks."

"In business you cannot go by any one's say-so."

"I do not doubt but there are plenty of men, right in this camp, who, if asked in regard to the value of this Heather Bell property, would freely say it was worth this sum or that sum, but they would not be willing to back up their opinion by planting down the cash and taking the property."

"Yes, of course, the opinion would not be valuable if there wasn't any one willing to buy at the price named."

"Certainly, that goes without saying, as the expression is."

"Well, I do not know what to do about it," Diantha observed, slowly, evidently greatly puzzled.

"I did not expect anything of the kind, and therefore I have not given any thought to the matter."

"It is really the only course open to you," the mayor urged.

"By making this transfer you will get a thousand dollars, but if you conclude not to do it, why I take possession of the mine, as I am entitled to, under the terms of the agreement, and you will not receive anything."

"Yes, but I do not wish Mr. MacGregor to make me a present of the money!" the high-spirited girl exclaimed, with natural independence.

"If the property is not worth the money I do not want to take it from him like a beggar!"

"Exactly, exactly, my dear Miss Maxwell, I assure you I appreciate your feeling, and really honor you for your noble sentiments!" Mayor White exclaimed, with a great flourish.

"But you do not correctly understand the situation, my dear young lady; that is only natural under the circumstances; being a woman you cannot be expected to be able to grasp these business matters at a glance like a man trained to it."

"It is not a gift that the marshal is making you, although at the first blush it looks like it."

"You see, the case is just like this."

"A man with plenty of money to run the mine, able to put in new machinery and improved appliances, *might* be able to make it pay—*might*, in time, make a good thing out of it!"

"The marshal has the money, the skill and the pluck to make the investment, but the way I am situated, I cannot spare the funds to develop the property, and so I would rather have the money than the mine; that is the whole case in a nutshell."

"Yes, yes, I see," Diantha murmured, reflectively.

"It is all right; you need feel under no obligations to the marshal, although of course it would be useless for me to deny that if he was not so deeply interested in you, the chances are great that he would not bother himself with the speculation."

"Yes, I understand, but am I obliged to sign this paper now—can I not have some time to think it over?"

"Oh, certainly, you can have until twelve o'clock," and the mayor consulted his watch. "It is now a little after eight, so you have nearly four hours."

The mayor was in high feather; he saw by the expression on the girl's face that she had ceased to worry over the matter, and he jumped to the natural conclusion that she had made up her mind to sign the paper, but with usual feminine inconsistency wanted to put the matter off to the last minute.

Then, too, the thought occurred to him that it was possible she did not fully trust him, as he was almost a stranger to her, and wished to consult Marshal MacGregor before she took any decided steps.

"And, by the way," he observed, "it would not be a bad idea if you had a talk with Mr. MacGregor about the matter."

"He will probably be able to explain the particulars to you more clearly than I have done."

"If you like, I will speak to the marshal when I go down-town and tell him that you would like to see him," he said, rising to depart.

"I should appreciate the kindness," Diantha replied, also rising.

"Will you have him come up here or will you see him at his office?"

"I presume at his office would be the most convenient," the girl replied.

"All right, I will tell him—you will be right down?"

"Well—within an hour or so."

"I'll have him all ready for you; good-morning!"

And the mayor departed, feeling fully satisfied

that the little scheme which had been so carefully planned was going to work in the most complete manner.

Twenty minutes after Mayor White departed Diantha was on her way also, but she was not bound for Black Mac's office.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A WOMAN'S WIT.

No, no, Diantha's suspicions had been aroused by this endeavor to get her to dispose of the mining property, and, instead of seeking the office of Marshal MacGregor, she went straight to the Golden Hairpin Saloon.

At such an hour there was nothing doing in the saloon to demand the attention of 'Frisco Nell, and she was in her private apartment.

The mistress of the Golden Hairpin ranch happened to be looking out of the window as the girl approached. Seeing that she was coming directly toward the saloon, she anticipated Diantha intended to call, and was ready to receive her.

'Frisco Nell was a close observer; she perceived from Diantha's face that she was greatly excited, and guessed that something out of the common run had happened.

After reaching the shelter of the apartment, Diantha came straight up to 'Frisco Nell and took her by the hand.

"You told me that you would be willing to serve me, even at the risk of life, like a true sister!" Diantha exclaimed.

"I did, and it is the truth!" 'Frisco Nell replied, warmly returning the pressure of the other's hand.

"Command me and you shall see."

"I am in deep trouble—surrounded, I fear, by enemies!" Diantha exclaimed with a deep sigh. "And you are the only soul in whom I dare to trust."

"Sit down and confide in me," the other said, drawing the excited girl to a chair. "And it will be strange indeed if my woman's wit cannot devise a way of getting you out of your trouble."

To 'Frisco Nell, Diantha related all the particulars of the mayor's visit.

The mistress of the Golden Hairpin Saloon listened until the recital was complete and did not interrupt the girl in any way, then she broke into a scornful laugh.

"Can't you see, Diantha, that you are being made the victim of a most skillfully-devised plot?"

"Oh, I don't know what to think, excepting that I feel that all is not right!"

"The tale in regard to the Heather Bell property being of doubtful value is all a lie! The mine is worth fifty thousand dollars, and I know it."

"Then, too, this attempt to make out that your brother died in debt! Why, it is utterly ridiculous! I know better."

"When your brother attempted to win me to be his wife he was extremely frank and honest with me in regard to his affairs, for he wanted me to see how well he was prospering."

"He has shown me Express receipts for fully ten thousand dollars; this I am sure of."

"Is it possible?" cried Diantha in wonder.

"Oh, yes, no doubt about it," 'Frisco Nell exclaimed, firmly.

"Although I am a woman, I understand business matters as well as any man that there is in this camp, or anywhere else, for that matter. I cannot be deceived in an affair of this kind."

"And then in regard to your brother having only made one payment on the mine, he only had *one payment to make!*"

"You astound me!" Diantha cried.

"I know it to be so, for I saw with my own eyes the receipts given by Mayor White for the money."

"After he paid the money your brother came into my saloon and showed me the receipts."

"There is no possibility of a mistake about this—no guess-work, you know. I am telling you what I saw with my own eyes."

"But where are these papers?"

"Stolen from your cabin by the masked men who invaded it on the night of your brother's murder!"

"You were right in your surmise that the robbers *did* discover the real hiding-place."

"Can't you see how the trick was worked? You were blindfolded so that you would not know that the men succeeded in the purpose for which they came, and that was to gain possession of these important papers."

"They suspected that you were not fully acquainted with the details of your brother's affairs, and so, if these papers were taken, you would not be able to tell whether he had died rich or poor."

"I see, I see—I am the victim of a most horrible plot!" Diantha exclaimed, terribly excited.

"Yes, no doubt about it; and the scheme has been worked so skillfully too that it most surely would have succeeded if fate had not happened to bring us two together."

"As it is, I think a plan can be devised to beat the plotters."

"Now don't give way to excitement, dear,"

'Frisco Nell said, perceiving that the girl was trembling in every limb.

She passed her arms caressingly around Diantha and drew her head down on her shoulder.

"Keep your wits about you—you and I will need all we possess in this struggle—and have courage."

"Oh, but to think I should be the victim of such a fearful plot!"

And Diantha, unable to restrain her emotions, burst into a flood of tears.

"That's right, cry away, dear; don't attempt to keep the tears back," 'Frisco Nell exclaimed, as she soothed the girl in her arms as though she were only a child.

"There's nothing in this world that will so relieve a woman's mind sometimes as a good cry."

"Shakespeare understood human nature in that respect, for in the play of Macbeth, when Macduff is informed of the slaughter of his wife and babes, he does not speak, but turns away and pulls his bonnet over his brows, then young Malcolm says:

"Give sorrow vent; the grief which does not speak whispers the o'erfraught heart and bids it break!"

"So it is with a woman, dear; a good cry has saved many a heartache."

It acted so in this case.

The flood of tears removed Diantha's excitement, and after she had succeeded in checking their flow and recovered her composure, she felt decidedly better.

"Oh, I can hardly explain what a dreadful feeling I had in my head," she said. "I felt as if I was going crazy!"

"I don't wonder at it! But now to business!" exclaimed the other, in her brisk way. "There is a difficult fight before us, and we must have some assistance, for we two girls cannot fight the powerful enemies we have to encounter."

"But whom can you call on for aid?"

"The man who just now is at the top of the heap in this camp, and whose very name will strike terror to the souls of your foes—Dick Talbot!"

A bright flush spread quickly over Diantha's cheeks, and her bright eyes sparkled with unwonted brilliancy.

"Ah, he would be a champion worth having, but do you think you could get him to aid us?" the girl asked, as if doubtful on this point.

"Oh, yes, we are pards."

"He—he is your lover, perhaps?" Diantha observed, slowly.

'Frisco Nell laughed.

"Oh, no, nothing of the kind? I don't believe the man ever thought of such a thing. We are both interested in discovering your brother's murderer, and so we entered into a sort of partnership."

"But I will send for him at once."

The messenger was dispatched, and as Talbot was only across the street in the hotel, he was soon in the presence of the two girls.

"You are acquainted with Miss Diantha Maxwell, Mr. Talbot?" asked 'Frisco Nell.

"Yes, I have that pleasure. Miss Diantha did me a service once—"

"And now you will have an opportunity to return the favor!" 'Frisco Nell exclaimed, abruptly.

"Sit down and listen while I explain the situation."

"With pleasure, but is the situation a complex one?"

"Extremely so; Miss Maxwell is in the toils of a snare as deep and dangerous as any fiend could devise."

"Would you have any objection to allowing that fat pard of mine to take part in our deliberations?" Talbot asked.

"Although he is not attractive in his appearance, yet he is as shrewd a fellow as breathes the breath of life this day, and when it comes to solving a difficult problem, I would sometimes rather have his head than my own."

"You know best of course; we are willing," 'Frisco Nell replied, but in her heart she thought that the sport was decidedly prejudiced in favor of the veteran bummer, for, as far as she could see, the only strong points about the fat and greasy fellow was his ability to get rid of an astonishing quantity of liquor and the success he had in getting other people to pay for it.

She did not oppose Talbot's request, though, and so Joe Bowers was summoned.

As after events proved, it was the most fortunate thing for all concerned that Dick Talbot thought of calling upon the veteran bummer to take part in the proceedings—but we will not anticipate.

After Bowers joined the party, 'Frisco Nell began:

"I am going to tell the story from the beginning, although some of the particulars are already known to you, Mr. Talbot, but I will rehearse all the particulars so we will have an opportunity of arriving at a correct judgment."

Talbot bowed assent, and Bowers followed his example with owl-like gravity.

Commencing with the mysterious murder of Donald Maxwell, 'Frisco Nell detailed all the

events that had occurred which had any relation to that tragedy, or to Diantha's fortunes, up to the mayor's visit that morning.

When the recital was concluded, Talbot was silent in thought for a few minutes.

"Well, what think you?" asked 'Frisco Nell at last.

"That you are right in regard to there being a plot fit to be the work of a fiend!" he declared.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

PLANNING THE BATTLE.

"You see, Diantha, Mr. Talbot agrees with me!" the mistress of the Golden Hairpin exclaimed.

"Oh, yes, and I think I understand the game now as well as though I had had a hand in forming the scheme," Talbot remarked.

"Listen, while I reveal the plot, and if you think I am wrong in any particulars say so."

The others nodded assent.

"I must speak plainly, Miss Maxwell, even though it may give you pain by recalling the loss you have sustained."

"Go on, do not mind me, sir," Diantha replied.

"Now, then, to begin with the assassination of your brother," Talbot commenced. "That crime was not committed without a motive."

"What was the motive?"

"Not revenge, for he had no foes in the camp desperate enough to undertake such a deed," 'Frisco Nell remarked.

"True, it seems so, but yet there was a motive for the bloody deed."

"Was he in anybody's way—was there anybody who would profit by his death?"

"At the time it did not seem as if there was, but now the development of this plot to seize the mine shows a motive for the murder of your brother."

"While he lived no attempt could be made to gain possession of the Heather Bell property."

"His death was the first step toward the capture of the mine."

"The next move was to rob your cabin in order to gain possession of all the valuable papers of the murdered man."

"When the receipts were stolen the plotters calculated that there was no way in which you could prove that your brother had money in the hands of the Express Company, or that he had paid Mayor White nearly all the purchase money due on the Heather Bell property."

"Then, in surveying the ground, the schemers thought of the books in the Express Office. By means of those books you would be able to discover that your brother had money to his credit, so the Express Office was entered and the books taken."

"I, at the time, wondered why any thieves should trouble themselves with such worthless articles, for no man with a grain of sense would hope to make anything by such an operation; in fact, by lugging away the books the robbers exposed themselves to the risk of detection."

"And I will bet a hat, too, that I know the chap that did both these tricks!" Joe Bowers exclaimed at this point.

"He's a little English crackman and I have known him off and on for years. I ran across him to-day in the outskirts of the camp, and as I saw he was trying to avoid me, I was jest fly enuff to pretend not to recognize him, but I did, though. I knew the crook the moment I put my peepers on him, and as I reckoned the feller wasn't up to no good I jest tracked him to his hole."

"He's living in a leetle, lonely cabin 'bout half a mile down the crick."

"That is an important piece of information!" Talbot declared.

"The next move after the Express books were taken, was for the mayor to come to you with this cunning scheme to get the mine transferred, but the mayor, I think, is only acting as the tool of another, and that other is the Marshal of No Man's Camp, Roderick MacGregor."

"Yes, and he is the man who killed your brother, too, Diantha!" 'Frisco Nell declared. "I suspected it from the first. He had a motive to commit the deed, besides his desire to gain possession of the Heather Bell property."

"This marshal, Mr. Talbot, was acquainted with Diantha and her brother in Scotland. He and Donald grew up there together."

"Both were wild when young, and committed acts which forced them to fly from Scotland."

"Your brother, Diantha, once, in a moment of confidence, told me that Roderick MacGregor had been his evil genius, and that if it had not been for him he would not have been obliged to leave his native country; and he further said that the marshal desired to marry you, Diantha, but that he would rather see you in your grave than married to such a scoundrel!"

"Yes, I know he was opposed to MacGregor's suit, although he was careful not to allow him to know it, for he said he did not want to incur the marshal's ill-will, which might cause him a deal of trouble."

"The marshal discovered that he was not friendly to him, of course; such things are bound to come out," Talbot remarked.

"Yes, undoubtedly. And there is the other motive for the murder; while Donald Maxwell lived the marshal well knew he would never get Diantha, but if he was out of the way, with her natural protector gone, and this scheme worked so that it seemed as though she was penniless, it appeared almost certain that she would become his prey."

"Oh, I have had a narrow escape!" exclaimed Diantha with a shudder. "I tremble even now when I think how nearly I came to consenting to become his wife."

"I knew that I did not love him, but he seemed so desirous of befriending me that I really wavered and thought, from pure gratitude, I ought to say, yes, to his suit."

"The last words of your brother are now explained," Talbot remarked.

"When he was stricken down by the bullet of the secret assassin, he suspected who it was that had given him the mortal wound, and when the mists of death gathered before his eyes, he uttered the accusing words to the man whom he had looked upon as his evil genius."

"Yes, yes, it is all clear to me now," Diantha said.

"And now the question is, can we bring the crime home to the marshal?" 'Frisco Nell asked. "Can we avenge the cruel murder of Donald Maxwell?"

Talbot slowly shook his head.

"I am afraid not," he replied. "The deed was committed in the darkness of the night, and the chances are that no eye but that of Heaven beheld the murderous act."

"Very true, but if he had a confederate we might get him to confess if we could discover the fellow," 'Frisco Nell observed, thoughtfully.

"Yes, to my thinking though, the chances are a thousand to one that he did not trust anyone else with the bloody secret. It is not like the man, and then he needed no assistance."

"True, true," 'Frisco Nell assented.

"I fear we cannot bring the murder home to him, but we can save the mine from falling into his power."

"At present it is in your hands, and as possession is nine points of the law, we will take measures to keep the enemy from seizing it by any sudden attack."

"Then you must pay this nine hundred to the mayor—he was foolish to give you any time, but, of course, he had no idea you could raise the money, and, in fact, never suspected you would try."

"But I haven't the money," Diantha objected.

"Well, I have, and you must allow me to be your banker for a while."

Diantha flushed slightly, cast a look of gratitude upon him, and said:

"You are very kind; I fear I can never repay you."

"Didn't you give me a warning which undoubtedly saved me from a murderous attack which might have cost me my life?"

And then Talbot explained to 'Frisco Nell about the warning on the hillside.

"But the first thing is to render the mine secure. Will you appoint me manager of the works, giving me full authority to act?"

"Certainly!" Diantha exclaimed.

"All right! you must go to the mine at once. I will follow at a safe distance behind, so as not to attract attention and lead people to suppose we are together."

"At the mine you must introduce me to the workmen and put me in control of the property."

"Bowers, I want you to pick out eight or ten good fighting men and bring them to the mine; work the thing carefully so that no one will have any suspicion of what is going on until we get our army inside the works."

"I kin do it," Joe Bowers replied, promptly.

"I know jest the men! I hain't sojourned long in this hyer camp, but I know every scallywag into it."

"I'll send the men up one by one, and every galoot that comes along and says his name, 'it is Joe Bowers,' let him in, fer he's O. K.!" And then the veteran departed on his mission.

"Now, Miss Diantha, please go ahead for there is no time to be lost."

"We must settle the mine business and get back here so as to pay the money before twelve o'clock."

"I will go immediately!" exclaimed Diantha rising in a flutter of excitement.

"Ah, Mr. Talbot, I fear I will never be able to pay you for this kindness."

"We will talk about that hereafter when the fight is won, but don't let it trouble you at present."

She thanked Talbot with a bright smile, shook hands with him warmly, kissed 'Frisco Nell and departed.

"By Jove! it would indeed be a shame to allow such a girl as that to fall the prey of a scoundrel like this villainous marshal!"

"Why don't you enter for the race yourself, Dick?" the girl asked with a meaning smile.

Talbot laughed.

"Well, perhaps I would if I thought I stood any chance. She is a girl well worth winning."

"And you are the man who can win her!"

"Do you think so?"

"Yes, no doubt."

"Do you remember what I am—a sport—a card-sharp?"

"Not at all! You are now the manager of the Heather Bell Mine and that is a good position for any man!"

"Oh, I am too old for her—I'm no chicken!"

"Well, you may be old, but you do not look it, and you have a deal of life before you yet, if I am any judge of appearances."

"Talbot, that girl is madly in love with you. I think she would have consented to marry the marshal if she had not encountered you; then she suddenly discovered what love was, and she would rather have died than wed Black Mac."

"She is yours if you want her, and you are very foolish if you don't take such a charming creature. Few men would be able to resist the temptation."

"Well, wait until this fight is ended, and then we will see," replied Talbot, thoughtfully.

Then he followed Diantha.

At the mine he was introduced as the manager, much to the satisfaction of the workmen, who were proud to be under such a man.

Talbot made a brief speech, explained that there was danger of the mine being "jumped," and that he was going to put an armed force in to hold the property for Miss Maxwell.

One and all declared they would fight to the death for the young "missus."

Then Bowers's men began to arrive, good, stout fellows, every one, and when Bowers brought up the rear with the last batch Talbot felt they could bid defiance to any force which could be raised in No Man's Camp.

"Now, Miss Maxwell, we will call upon the mayor," he said.

"And I am arter that English galoot for to see what deviltry he has been up to!" Bowers declared.

On the way to the mayor's office, Talbot instructed the girl in regard to the coming interview.

"Cunning as these fellows think themselves, we will beat them at their own game!" bold Injun Dick exclaimed.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

A SURPRISE.

MAYOR WHITE sat in his office awaiting the arrival of Miss Maxwell.

He was in a decidedly good humor, and he rubbed his hands together gleefully every now and then.

"This is a fine scheme and nicely worked!" he declared.

"We shall make the rifle, and I shall haul in a goodly store of dollars without much trouble."

At this point the marshal poked his head in at the door.

"Have you seen anything of the gal?" he asked.

"Not yet."

"It is time she arrived."

"Yes, she was coming right down."

"I understood you to say that she said she would visit me first."

"So she did—that is exactly what she said."

"It is after eleven," the marshal remarked, consulting his watch.

"Yes, but women are never punctual, you know. When a girl like this one says right away, she means within two or three hours."

"You don't have any doubt about the matter?"

"Oh, no; she was flustered and bothered of course; that was only natural under the circumstances; she will come up to the scratch all right."

Just then the mayor happened to glance through the window and caught sight of Diantha.

"Here she comes now and she is coming here first!" he exclaimed.

"I reckon she caught sight of me in the doorway," the marshal remarked, entering as he spoke.

"I shouldn't be surprised."

The marshal took a chair, and in about five minutes Diantha entered.

The mayor rose and received her with a courtly bow, while Black Mac hastened to give her a chair.

"I did not come down as soon as I expected," she said.

"Oh, it doesn't make any difference," Mayor White responded. "You have plenty of time. All that was required was for you to get here before twelve."

"You said I had until twelve o'clock to pay the money, though where I am to get such a sum is a puzzle!" the girl observed with a smile.

"Oh, don't trouble yourself about that," the mayor remarked, gallantly. "You have until twelve o'clock to pay as I said, and if it is not settled by then I take possession, but I guess the marshal hyer will accommodate you with the funds."

"No need to trouble the marshal," observed Talbot, as he walked into the room followed by 'Frisco Nell.

Diantha had neglected to latch the door after her, on purpose.

The men were astounded at this unexpected appearance and stared at the sport.

The suspicion immediately flashed upon them that something was wrong, but they did not comprehend the nature or extent of the blow which they felt was coming.

"It is only twenty minutes past eleven, mayor, so Miss Maxwell has plenty of time to settle the matter," Talbot continued.

Then he drew a bulky roll of bills from his pocket and cast them upon the table in front of White.

"There's the money; count it, please, and give Miss Maxwell her receipt."

"Eh, what—what is the meaning of this?" White exclaimed, in angry bewilderment, while the marshal ground his teeth together in rage.

"Why, that is the nine hundred dollars to pay the claim which you have brought forward against the Heather Bell property. Count it and see if it is all right."

"And, by the way, mayor, don't get rid of this nine hundred, or eight hundred of it, anyway, for really a hundred dollars is all that is due you, and when the missing receipts are found I shall call upon you to refund the money."

"No such thing—the money was never paid!" exclaimed White, getting very red in the face.

"Yes, it was!" cried Frisco Nell. "Nine hundred of the thousand was paid, for I saw every receipt—all in your own handwriting, and bearing your signature—I can take my oath to it!"

"See hyer, Talbot, you are interfering in a matter which don't concern you!" the marshal exclaimed, rising and laying his hand on the butt of one of his revolvers.

But Talbot was prepared for just such a movement: and before the hand of the marshal touched the pistol, the sport had him covered with a cocked derringer.

"Take your hand out of that, or I'll give the citizens of No Man's Camp a chance to choose a new marshal!" Talbot cried, sternly.

With a scowl of baffled rage Black Mac folded his arms.

"You needn't think, Mr. Talbot, because you have won a street-fight or two, that you are going to run the whole camp!" the marshal cried.

"All I care to run at present is the Heather Bell mine, of which I have the honor to be the manager."

The two men looked surprised at this intelligence.

"It is true, gentlemen; I have this day put Mr. Talbot in as manager to run the property for me," Diantha remarked.

This was an unexpected stroke, and the plotters were confused.

"Come, mayor, count your money and give the lady her receipt!" Talbot exclaimed.

"Yes, but I don't understand this at all!" Mayor White exclaimed. "When I called upon you this morning, Miss Maxwell, you gave me to understand that you intended to accept Mr. MacGregor's offer and transfer the mine to him."

"Oh, no, I did not say anything of the sort—decidedly not!" Diantha cried.

"And I am not at all responsible for any misunderstanding," she added.

"All I said was that I would like time to think the matter over—to seek counsel, which I did, of this gentleman," and she nodded to Talbot.

"It is not my fault if you jumped to the conclusion that I intended to transfer the property. In fact, you ought to have arrived at an entirely different opinion, for I most decidedly said that I did not think the offer was anything like the value of the property."

It was as much as Mayor White could do to keep from groaning aloud when he saw how neatly he had been tricked, and he racked his brains to find some way out of the trap in which he so unexpectedly found himself.

Then a bright idea flashed upon him.

He drew himself up proudly and pushed the roll of bills to the edge of the table.

"I have changed my mind—I will keep the property," he said.

"Oh, no, you will not," Talbot asserted.

"Why won't I?" the mayor cried, beginning to bluster.

"Young men, you don't know what you are talking about! You must not think because you are a dicker that you can come in here and brow-beat me out of my rights!"

"Your rights?"

"Yes, my rights. This money ought to have been paid yesterday. According to the agreement under which the mine was sold, the money was due yesterday, and it was expressly stated that if it was not paid the property was to revert to me without any legal proceedings. Here's the agreement."

And the mayor, producing the contract, extended it toward Talbot, but that gentleman waved it back.

"Oh, I don't wish to see the contract; I will take your word for it."

"But, see here, in regard to this payment; you expressly gave this lady until twelve o'clock to-day to make the payment. I heard you with my own ears."

"Yes, so did I," asserted Frisco Nell.

"Well, I have changed my mind, and propose now to stick to the express letter of the contract. A man has a right to do that, I reckon!" White blustered.

"Well, I don't know about that, for in my opinion you have not. Still, it is a legal point which might take lawyers and a judge to settle."

"Most certainly your verbal agreement with this lady in regard to being willing to wait until twelve o'clock to-day for the payment ought to have some weight, particularly when it can be proved by witnesses."

"No, sir; the contract cannot be altered," the mayor declared.

"There you bring another legal point which none of us here are lawyers enough to settle," Talbot remarked. "And since we have got down to legal points, allow me to ask you if you made any demand for this money yesterday, when you say the payment ought to have been made?"

The mayor knew enough about the law to understand that he had made a blunder in this matter, but as he had gone in to ride a high horse he determined to keep it up.

"I see that you don't know as much about the law as you think you do!" he exclaimed, in a patronizing way. "And I will have to post you in regard to a point or two."

"The law don't require me to make any demand for this money. It is the debtor's duty to come up to the scratch and pay when the money is due without notification."

"Yet, I guess any lawyer will tell you that it would strengthen your case to have made the demand."

"No, sir; no, sir!"

"Another point: you claim nine hundred, and we say only one is due; but we are willing to pay the nine to settle the matter, and then when we get our proof together we will make you refund."

"I will not take the money at all. I demand the mine!"

"You cannot have it."

"Then there will be trouble, for I shall call upon the marshal to raise a force and seize the property!"

"You will?"

"Yes, sir, that is my little game!"

"It will not work," Talbot replied, with a quiet smile.

"I had an idea that you might try some such trick as this, and so I have put an army of twenty men into the mine, and I reckon we can hold the fort against any force that you can raise."

The mayor and the marshal looked at each other.

This was a movement that they had not anticipated.

"There is an old saying, you know, about possession being nine points of the law," Talbot continued.

"Well, we have possession, and I reckon we can hold the property, too, and if you think we cannot, just get your fighting-men together and come in!"

"If we don't give you all the war you want, then I have made some mistake in my calculations."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

AN UNEXPECTED DISCLOSURE.

THE anger that raged in the hearts of the two conspirators at being thus cleverly checkmated, could plainly be seen in their countenances.

The scheme had been cunningly planned to rob the helpless Diantha of her property, but in making their calculations neither of the two had provided for the coming into the field, on behalf of the girl, of such a champion as Dick Talbot.

The putting of the armed force in to hold the mine was a master stroke, and they saw no way to break the force of the blow.

Such a man as Dick Talbot, with the reputation for fighting which he possessed, with a few well-armed, resolute men could easily hold the mining property against any force that they could raise.

They had been out-generated—put into a hole, and they saw no way of getting out of it.

The marshal was the first to give up the fight.

"Well, I reckon, Mister Mayor, we had better try and fix the matter up in some way," he observed, slowly.

"I don't really see why we should go to war about the thing; we have trouble enough now in the camp without setting it by the ears."

"Mr. Talbot has got the best of the fight; there is no getting over that, and there is no use of our closing our eyes to the truth, or trying to make out that two and two make six."

"I s'pose you are about right," the mayor admitted.

"And as long as matters are as they are,

let us settle things as quietly and easily as possible."

"All right, just as you say," White observed.

"Accept this money that Mr. Talbot tenders and so end the matter."

"Very well, I will make out the receipt," and the mayor took his seat at the table.

At this point the veteran bummer, Joe Bowers, made his appearance, entering without warning.

"Hello, hello, quite a gathering, I sw'ar; I reckon now that you are all old business, every time, and that is the kind of a hairpin I am too!"

"W'ot's going on hyer, anyway?"

Talbot understood that it was no idle curiosity that caused the veteran to put the question and so he answered.

"Miss Maxwell is going to pay Mayor White the money due on the Heather Bell property."

"How much is it?"

"What business is it of yours, you greasy loafer?" cried the mayor, angrily.

"You had better go slow with yer names, or I'll jump down yer throat and choke ye!" Bowers warned, shaking his finger at the official with great solemnity.

"Jest spit out the sum—how much money does this old galoot of a mayor claim?"

"What's that?" cried White, in wrath.

"Hush yer yawp, and give a gen'lman a chance."

"Nine hundred dollars!" Talbot answered.

"He's a liar from Liarsville!" Bowers declared. "Hyer are his receipts for eight hundred dollars!"

And the bummer handed the papers to Talbot.

The blow was so entirely unexpected that the shock almost took White's breath away, while the marshal grew white with rage and reached for his revolver.

The veteran was on his guard for just such a thing, though, for in his right hand he held a short club, which he had concealed behind him, and when Black Mac "went for" his weapon, Bowers sprung forward and dealt him a lick on the head which knocked him, half stunned, into the corner, and before he could recover from the shock, the veteran bummer had removed his weapons and pinioned his wrists with a stout lariat.

"Oh, ain't he a p'isoned sarpint, but I reckon I have drawn his teeth!" the veteran exclaimed, in triumph.

The mayor did not attempt to interfere, but stared like one dazed by a heavy blow.

"I did the trick that I went for to do," Bowers explained.

"I surprised the English cracksman in his cabin, and got the bulge onto him before he knew w'ot I was up to, and then, when he found that his cake was all dough, he made a clean breast of it."

"I was mighty persuasive with him. I got a lariat round his neck and strung him up to one of the rafters of the cabin until he weakened," the veteran remarked, with a grin.

"He allers was a first-class workman, but he never had no backbone, and that is what allers spoiled him."

"To make a long story short—to come to Hecuba, he has been acting as the marshal's tool ever since this cuss brought him from Tombstone, and he imported him expressly to do this dirty work."

"Bobby Smithers his name is, but the perlice know him better as Cadger Bob."

"He's the man w'ot committed the robberies, and MacGregor here stood in with him as his pard."

"It is a lie!" cried the marshal, hoarsely, having by this time recovered from the blow. "Would you take the word of an acknowledged thief against mine?"

"Yes, you bet! when it is backed up by good, strong evidence!" Bowers exclaimed.

"Cadger Bob had these receipts, the Express Company's books, and Express receipts, miss, showing that yer brother had over ten thousand dollars deposited at the time he was murdered, and he confessed to me that he and the marshal hyer stole all of them."

"Again I say it is a lie, and you don't dare to confront me with this scoundrel."

"Oho, you know the man well enuff—you know that he wouldn't have the sand to stay in the town arter giving you away, and if I hadn't agreed to let him slide he wouldn't have made so clean a breast of it, but I have got his written confession, properly witnessed, too, and, furthermore, he sed that he felt certain that you were the man who killed Donald Maxwell, for before the night of his death you had a thirty-two caliber revolver, and he never saw you with it afterward, and that was the kind of weapon with which Maxwell was killed."

Diantha grew deathly pale and averted her face with a shudder from the marshal.

"I tell you it is all a lie!" cried Black Mac in hoarse accents.

"The scoundrel committed all these crimes himself, no doubt, and in order to save his own neck, has tried to throw the blame on me."

"I defy you to prove these charges, and what

are you going to do about it, anyway?" he added, defiantly.

"If I had my way I would give you a short shrift and a long rope!" Talbot exclaimed.

"You bet! and I wouldn't mind taking a tug at that rope myself, jest for greens!" Bowers cried.

"Oh, I am in your power now, of course!" the marshal declared. "And if you have a mind to raise a hue and cry, I don't doubt you could succeed in getting a mob together to murder me."

"Let him go!" cried Diantha, abruptly, with an appealing glance at Talbot. "For Heaven's sake do not have his blood upon your hands!"

"Let him go, whether he be innocent or guilty!"

"If he is guilty there is ample time for him to repent and lead a new life!"

"Thank you for nothing!" MacGregor cried, angrily. "You are driving me forth an outcast, and yet you expect me to become a goody goody man!"

"Well, if you are wise, you will change, for if you don't you are as certain to die with your boots on as that you are a living man!" Talbot remarked.

"I will risk that, but I am willing to accept the conditions and depart. You have beaten me and I am satisfied to give up the struggle," Black Mac said.

By this time the mayor had recovered his presence of mind and thought it would be well for him to say something.

"I will admit I have been mixed up in this affair, and have acted imprudently—all for the sake of making a few dollars, but in regard to these crimes I can honestly assure you I know nothing at all about them, and I hope you will not lay up any ill-will against me," he said humbly.

"And I am willing to give up the last hundred dollars due me on the mine as a slight payment for the trouble which I have had a hand in causing."

"Did the cracksman make any charge against the mayor?" Talbot asked.

"Nary time! I axed him 'bout that, and he sed the mayor knew nothing 'bout the thing; the marshal and he worked the tricks."

"It is all right, mayor; we will call it square," Talbot observed.

"Now, if you will have the kindness to release me from these bonds, and give me a few hours to arrange my affairs, I will light out," the marshal remarked with elaborate politeness.

"All right; four-and-twenty hours ought to be enough," Talbot replied.

"Ample time; and I say, if it is all the same to you, will you keep this matter quiet and let me start with a clean bill of health?"

"Yes, yes," Diantha exclaimed, "of what avail is it to publish another man's shame?"

Talbot did not exactly agree with the girl in regard to this, but kept quiet and did not oppose her wishes.

The marshal was as good as his word.

Within four-and-twenty hours he departed.

"Important business calls me to Tombstone," he said; "don't know when I will be back—may conclude to locate there. If you don't hear from me in a month consider that I have resigned the office of marshal and put in a new man. This Talbot will fill the bill, for he's got the sand."

And so, with light speech, but with the bitterness of death in his heart, he rode forth from the camp which he had ruled so long with his iron hand.

Our tale is nearly told.

But a few more words.

Talbot soon saw that 'Frisco Nell was correct about Diantha Maxwell and that her heart was his.

He spoke the words the loving girl longed to hear, and they were married, Joe Bowers making his appearance in a bran-new suit of store-clothes, with a "billed" shirt, in honor of the occasion.

'Frisco Nell was the bridemaid, and none of the guests suspected the sacrifice she had made, for she had learned to love Talbot with all the strength of her wild, passionate nature, but with true womanly courage she concealed her pain beneath a smiling face.

And so, Master of Heather Bell Mine and of the peerless Diantha, we leave bold Injun Dick in No Man's Camp.

THE END.

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